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Magic, Music and Poetry: Prokofiev’s Creative Relationship
with Bal’mont and the Genesis of Semero ikh

Sergei Prokofiev’s incantation for tenor, chorus and orchestra, Semero ikh (Seven, They Are Seven, op 30, 1917), stands out among his compositions as a work of striking originality, which exudes an extraordinary spirit of primitive, even savage intensity. In his autobiography of 1941 he drew attention to the fact that the first stage of its composition took place entirely without a piano: the definitive outline of the work was initially determined by the text on which it is based. The source that played such an important role in this respect was highly arcane, even by the standards of the times. Prokofiev chose a free poetic rendering by the Russian Symbolist poet Konstantin Bal’mont (1867–1942) of an ancient Accadian incantation, designed to exorcise the seven evil demons that rule the world. This article will explore the significance of this source text within the general context of Prokofiev’s attraction to Bal’mont, thereby relating the composer’s musical setting to the broad cultural background from which it sprang.

The close association between music and literature that has always prevailed in the Russian cultural tradition was particularly strong at the time of Prokofiev’s intellectual and artistic formation. The desire to discover and establish new connections between the arts was embraced as a guiding principle in the work of numerous writers, painters and musicians; the same aesthetic ideal was also fostered by the eclectic, multi-disciplinary contents of leading journals such as Mir iskusstva, Vesny and Apollon. Prokofiev’s extensive involvement with literature throughout his musical career emerged directly out of this context. His own considerable literary talent (revealed in his autobiography, ‘Soviet Diary’ of 1927 and short stories) manifested itself in the care and skill with which he adapted an impressive range of literary sources to a wide variety of musical genres, including opera, ballet and film. In the main he was attracted to the classics of Russian and European literature, and chose to work on adaptations of novels and plays by authors such as Pushkin, Dostoevsky, Tolstoi, Shakespeare, Gozzi and Sheridan. He also based a few operas on contemporary novels by Briusov, Valentin Kataev and Boris Polevoi, and cooperated with the Acmeist poet Gorodetsky on the unproduced ballet Ala i Lolli (Ala and Lolly), eventually absorbed into Skifskaia suiuta (The Scythian Suite).

Prokofiev’s involvement with verse was much more limited in scope; he only set a relatively small number of poems to music, including works by Apukhtin, Bal’mont, Gippius, Akhmatova and Pushkin, as well as by a few less well-known poets. However, he attached considerable importance to his work in this area. Although he did not write verse himself, he was close friends with a number of poets and prided himself on his grasp of the principles of poetic form. In the summer of 1922, for example, he amused himself by competing with his friend the poet Boris Bashkirov (Verin) to see who could produce the best translations (in sonnet form) of poems by Hérida; Bal’mont and Severin were appointed as judges and sent them grades and “risqué observations” on their efforts. Prokofiev was awarded the highest scores and won the contest; he was immensely proud that he had vanquished a ‘born
poet" and commented in his diary: "If I hadn't been a composer, I would probably have been a writer or a poet. One thing is for sure—I write better verse than Tchaikovsky." Many years later, speaking at a gathering of writers and composers organised by the Union of Composers in December 1939, Prokofiev recalled this episode and his own love of the sonnet form in order to refute the opinion that composers are generally ignorant of versification (at the same time he also argued that poets should be familiar with the principles of musical composition). This understanding of the ways in which music and poetry can interact and benefit each other explains why his musical settings for poetry show a great sensitivity to the form of the original, in keeping with the "scrupulous attention to the literary text" that characterises his work in this area.

Against this general background, Prokofiev's relationship with Bal'mont stands out for its longevity and productivity. Their friendship was at its most intense during two main periods: for a couple of years immediately before the Revolution of 1917, when they were both based in Petrograd, and for several months in 1921, when they lived near each other in the small village of St Brévin-les-Pins in Brittany. Their creative links extended well beyond the period of these encounters, however. Prokofiev first turned to Bal'mont's poetry in 1909, while he was still a student at the Conservatory in St Petersburg; many years later, in 1933, he returned to Bal'mont for the last time when revising Semero ikh. As well as setting a total of ten works by Bal'mont to music (op 7, 1909–1910; op 9, 1910–1911; op 23, 1915; op 30, 1917; op 36, 1921), Prokofiev took the idea, title and epigraph for his series of miniatures Mimoletnosti (Visions fugitives, op 22, 1915–1917) from a poem by Bal'mont and dedicated his Third Piano Concerto (op 26, 1917–1921) to the poet. For his part, Bal'mont wrote a number of literary works connected with the composer, including several poems on the composer and his music, a short story dedicated to him ('Lunnaia gost'ia' ['The Lunar Guest'], 1922) and, under the pseudonym of Mstislav, a nostalgic prose memoir about their encounters ('O Serge Prokof'eve' ['About Sergei Prokofiev'], 1927).

In many ways it may seem surprising that this relationship should have turned out to be so enduring and fruitful. Bal'mont and Prokofiev not only belonged to quite different generations, separated by a quarter of a century, they were also fundamentally dissimilar in temperament and artistic tastes. Whereas Bal'mont was affiliated with Symbolism and held strong political views (first anti-tsarist, then anti-Bolshevik), Prokofiev did not subscribe to any particular artistic movement and remained fairly apolitical throughout his life. These considerable disparities of age and outlook invite one to speculate on why Prokofiev was so drawn to Bal'mont's work. The most obvious explanation is the one that Prokofiev himself gives in his late autobiography, where he writes that he was first attracted to Bal'mont's texts "by the exceptional musicality of their language".7 In an earlier letter of 12 December 1922 to the music critic Pierre Souvchinsky, he also emphasises his love for the music of Bal'mont's language, commenting that the poet had no equals in this area.8

Bal'mont himself constantly drew attention to the musical qualities of his verse; in this respect he saw himself as a true disciple of Fet, whom he regarded as his "godfather in poetry".9 In his famous early collection, Budem kak solntse! (Let Us Be Like the Sun!, 1902), he declared musicality as the central principle and major innovation of his verse:

Я—изысканность русской медитальной речи,
Предо мною другие поэты—предтечи,
Я впервые открыл в этой речи уклонь,
Перепевные, гневные, нежные звоны.10
[I am the elegance of the lingering Russian language,
Before me other poets are forerunners,
I first discovered in this language curves,
Recurrent, wrathful, tender sounds.]

The message is confirmed by the medium: the majestic slow-moving anapaests, the abundant use of assonance, alliteration and internal rhymes all convey the poet’s declared mastery of the musical potential of the Russian language. Later, in his brief autobiography of 1909, Bal’mont went so far as to claim (quite unabashedly) that no one in Russia had known how to write musical verse before he came on the scene. Although Blok commented a little acidly on this statement that other poets “such as Pushkin, for example,” had written verse before Bal’mont, it was generally accepted by Bal’mont’s contemporaries that the core of his contribution to the development of Russian poetry lay in his innate musicality. Briusov, for example, referred to him as a “slave of sounds, slave of harmonies” and compared his significance for Russian poetry to that of Verlaine for French poetry, as both poets attached greater value to the musical properties of verse than to its content or meaning. This was why so many distinguished composers, including Glüe, Rakhmaninov, Stravinsky and Taneev, as well as Prokofiev, were attracted to Bal’mont’s verse (according to one count, at least two hundred and seventy-nine of his lyrics have been set to music).

Was the rather diffuse concept of musicality in verse the only reason for Prokofiev’s attraction to Bal’mont? Although this was undoubtedly the initial impulse, it was evidently reinforced over time by a second, more specific dimension of Bal’mont’s musicality: the strong emphasis that the poet placed on the connection between music and magic, present in primitive cultures and articulated in poetry. This association was implicit in Bal mont’s verse from the outset (most clearly in his numerous poems on music, musicians and composers) and received a fresh impetus after the revolution of 1905 when he turned to Russian folklore in order to incorporate its charms and spells into his verse—a new departure first marked in his collections Zhye chary. Kniga zaklattii (Evil Charms. A Book of Spells, 1906) and Zhar-pititsa. Svirel’ slavianina (The Fire-Bird. The Reed-Pipe of the Slav, 1907).

The intrinsic links between music, poetry and sorcery were subsequently developed more explicitly by Bal’mont in a series of lectures and essays that he wrote after his return to Russia from exile, during the period immediately preceding and overlapping with his first meetings with Prokofiev. Between 1914 and 1917 he wrote several pieces connected with music: a lecture on poetry as magic, first delivered in 1914 and published as a separate booklet in 1915, a popular lecture on music, delivered on 9 April 1917 at the first “morning of music and poetry for the people,” and a study of Skriabin’s Colour Symphony, also published in 1917. In the first of these works, Poeziia kak volshebstvo (Poetry as Magic), he developed his central thesis that the “primitive mind,” after “listening attentively to the music of all the voices of Nature”, “composes these into an inner music, and externally expresses it through the melodious word, tale, magic, incantation”. “Poetry”, therefore, “is inner Music, externally expressed in measured language”. Since “music is sorcery [koldovstvo], always stirring in our soul our original foundation, the invisible stream of our songs, the whirlpool that pours into itself from itself”, it follows that poetry, through its intimate connection with music, also partakes of magic. “The incantatory word is Music, and Music on its own is an incantation, which forces our stagnant unconscious to be roused and to light up with a phosphoric light.” One can infer from this contention that poetry, set to music, must be the most powerful artistic expression of sorcery.
This understanding of the relationship between music and poetry provides the key to the creative relationship between Bal’mont and Prokofiev: Bal’mont turned to music as the original manifestation of sorcery, the power that inspired his works, while Prokofiev, with his interest in primitive beliefs and ‘Scythian’ culture, turned to Bal’mont for texts that could articulate the awareness of this link. Significantly, out of the ten texts by Bal’mont that Prokofiev chose to set to music, the first four are purely lyrical (related to the description of nature and love), while the fifth text, the Accadian incantation used in Semero iikh, marks the transition to an interest in Bal’mont’s association with magic. This direction is then developed in Prokofiev’s next setting of Bal’mont: three of the five poems from op 36 (1921) are related to ancient or modern charms and incantations.18

Given the pivotal role played by the Accadian incantation in the development of Prokofiev’s approach to Bal’mont, it is important to understand the context in which this text was presented by Bal’mont and received by his readers. For this we must go back to the first published version of the text, which originally appeared under the title of ‘Akkadiiskaia nadpis’ (‘Accadian Inscription’) in Bal’mont’s poetic anthology of ancient texts, Zovy drevnosti. Gimny, pesni i zamysly drevnikh (Calls of Ancient Times. Hymns, Songs and Ideas of the Ancients, 1908).19 The book was substantial in size (212 pages) as well as range. It opens with a preface by the author, dated 13 February 1908, followed by two original poems, introducing the collection. The core of the volume consists of ninety-eight ancient texts, grouped in sections corresponding to the thirteen different civilisations that they represent: Egypt (10), Mexico (13), Maya (3), Peru (5), Chaldea (1), Assyria (5), India (5), Iran (9), China (18), Oceania (9), Ancient Greece (14), Scandinavia (3), Brittany (3). The book closes with twenty pages of ‘Explanatory Comments’ on its contents.

While it is possible that Bal’mont had already assembled some of these texts before he left Russia in January 1906, it seems more likely that the bulk of his work on the collection took place during the first two years of his exile, up until mid-February 1908 when he completed his preface. One may well wonder why a Russian poet, living abroad, should have been drawn to such a vast range of alien cultures, remote in time and space, rather than to reflections on his homeland or new place of residence. Although Bal’mont’s reputation as a prolific translator of modern literature was already well established, the ground covered in this collection represented an entirely new departure into unfamiliar, obscure territory, even by the esoteric standards of the Symbolists.

Paradoxically, however, even when reaching out to the most distant cultures, Bal’mont always remained firmly focused on Russia and his own poetic world. In his preface, grandiosely entitled ‘Kosny mirvogo slova’ (‘Fires of the Universal Word’), he makes a point of underlining the purpose of the collection and its relevance to modern Russia. After an exhilarating canter through the ancient civilisations of the world covered in his anthology, he takes his imaginative journey one step further to include the more recent Russian folkloric past (“to listen to our native Perun”), and then casts a bridge forwards to link up with the “charms” of contemporary urban art. According to his agenda, the “complex task” of the modern artist is to hear “the voice of the moment and particular place in their essential unity”, and “to recreate what is heard”, “melodiously, in flowing verse or in prosaic broken language”. For the voices of ancient civilisations are “calls” [zovy] to which the artist must respond with his own “echoes” [otzyvki], just as a “mountain echo” catches a sound and throws it further, from cave to cave. The artist may catch the sound imperfectly, but whatever he grasps will sound forth to others as an “exciting summons”.

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The specifically national dimension of this ambitious cultural programme becomes explicit at the end of the preface, when Bal’mont calls upon all “Russian poets of present times” (for “the ferment of true art now exists only in Russia”) to create a starry firmament with the “Russian Poetic Word” by lighting up the lamps of forgotten treasures, buried in the past. Bal’mont even goes so far as to propose a practical plan for the execution of this monumental project. He divides up the cultures of the world between himself and the leading writers and artists of his day (painters are included, but not musicians), taking the lion’s share for himself (all ancient cosmogonies, as well as Spain and England). He concludes with a utopian vision of this “Singing Brotherhood,” gathered on a night plain, ready to take part in the holy game of passing the sacred lamp “from hand to hand, and from land to land” in order to light up “fires in the heavens”.

In many ways Bal’mont’s ideal represents an extension of Dostoevsky’s famous Pushkin speech of 1880, in which Russia’s national poet was presented as ‘proof’ of the unique ability of the Russian soul to absorb and distil the essence of all world cultures. Bal’mont’s grand scheme puts Russia at the centre of the world map and himself at the head of the proposed “Singing Brotherhood”. Although it is easy to understand how such a vision could be attractive to artists (placed in a direct line of communication with the past and elevated to a role of special significance in the present), there is also a manifest danger in any such programme. Will the world cultures thus embraced not be stripped of their individual character, when filtered through the prism of the receiving culture? Although Bal’mont had travelled in many of the areas of the world represented in his collection and had some grasp of a few ancient languages, his knowledge of the original texts was clearly limited. Furthermore, his notes, although copious, give absolutely no indication of his original sources. This raises the problem of the status of the texts presented in his anthology. Are they translations, as commonly understood, or original poems? Bal’mont himself does not once use the word “translation” in his collection, preferring instead to speak of poetic “echoes”. Are we therefore gaining access to the original cultures, or just reading Bal’mont’s imaginative recreation of them through the prism of his own poetic tastes? If these texts are not validated by their status as translations, do they have any merit as poetry?

One contemporary critic, D Filosofov, was quite blunt in expressing his low opinion of the collection. Although he was prepared to acknowledge Bal’mont’s talent as a poet, he attacked his desire “to lecture and to plant high culture in our uncultured society” and derided his “calls” as “a quite uncultured work”, giving “no familiarity with world literature” and only capable of “putting the reader off literature in general and off ancient times in particular”. Viacheslav Ivanov, one of Bal’mont’s most perceptive readers, voiced a more general concern about Bal’mont’s inability to relate to anything beyond himself; in private he described the poet as a loquacious “graphomaniac”, “incapable of hearing others”: “He reads many books, but only grasps that which seems Bal’montian to him […]. He has travelled in many countries [… but has everywhere seen only himself. [… And therefore, when Bal’mont translates Shelley or Poe, he ‘balmontaminates’ [obal’monchivaet] them.”

Bal’mont, who tended to see himself as the centre of the universe, might well have agreed with Ivanov, but would have seen his solipsistic view of world cultures as a strength rather than weakness. This attitude is clearly reflected in a letter that he wrote to his fellow poet and friend Briusov in early April 1908 from the same hospital room in Berkendael, Flanders (surrounded by his “beloved books”), where he had composed the preface to his anthology a few months earlier while recovering from a mysterious accident. The letter begins: “Valerii, the last hours of the eleventh week that I have spent alone in these four walls
are now coming to an end. Many times in these unforgettable weeks, in these lonely—happily lonely—polar days and nights, I have embraced infinite spaces in my thoughts. As in the Book of Job: ‘I walked over the Earth, and walked around it.’ But I also walked along the longitudes of time and along the ripples of ethereal space.” His tone is tinged with megalomania: “O, Valerii, my dark-eyed brother, above the whirlwind and dark of the breakers, you and I are two bright stars.”

Bal’mont was clearly on a different wavelength from most of his readers and therefore fairly impervious to their criticisms. In early December 1908, he wrote again to Brusov, this time from Florence, reiterating his view of his collection as a valuable form of poetic “response”: “Translating, of course, should always be from the original. But *Calls of Ancient Times* are not a translation in the exact sense of the word. I hear there, in the Departed, numerous calls, I am separated from them by many barriers and, incidentally, by my ignorance of Assyrian writing and limited knowledge of Egyptian and Aztec writing, but I can hear something out there exactly and clearly. I give a response. Let whoever is capable give a more exact and resonant response.” After drawing attention to the value of his work in introducing unknown works to the public, he defended the accuracy of his versions from the attacks of the “illiterate Filosofov” and concluded: “I repeat, it is not a translation, it is a poet’s impressions of certain creations which lie in undeserved oblivion. I believe that I am throwing out a thread here to someone.”

Bal’mont was not mistaken on this score: the thread was taken up some nine years later, when Prokofiev chose the poet’s second version of the Accadian incantation as the basis of *Semero ikh*. Prokofiev’s musical setting can therefore be seen as a response to the call that Bal’mont addressed in his preface to contemporary artists, inviting them to renew Russian art by returning to the lost mysteries of the past. His choice of the incantation was undoubtedly influenced by Bal’mont’s high regard for it and presentation of its significance. It is the only text in the anthology that acts as the sole representative of an entire civilization (Chaldea); Bal’mont commented on its unique status in his notes: “The charm against the Seven Destructive Genies is the best incantation in terms of strength that can be found in the whole world’s treasury of spells.”

Apart from its intrinsic power, there were a few additional aspects of the incantation that Bal’mont highlighted in his other writings. He first cites and discusses the text at length in ‘Chuvstvo rasy v tvorchestve’ (‘The Sense of Race in Art’), an essay written in Brussels in November 1907 (before the preface to *Zovy drevnosti*) but not published until 1910. The essay opens with some thoughts on the way in which the music of different countries reflects distinct national traits (examples include Grieg, the song of a Vladimir peasant, Wagner, Chopin, Bach and Schumann). In a clever play on words, Bal’mont argues that art is always built out of two extremes, which may exist separately or together: “the sense of a separate country, land [kraj]” and “the sense of a separate personal infinity [beskrainosti]”. The best works are those which combine both extremes. Bal’mont then turns to verbal art to illustrate his point. The central text that he chooses for this purpose is ‘Akkadiiskaia nadpis’. He introduces it as a work that immediately makes him feel surrounded by “bewitching Chaldeans, in the world of extreme religious contrasts in which Babylon was born,” “in the world where the Sun burns, where winds scorch, where passions consume.” He then cites the work, omitting the last five lines in which the demons are addressed by name. His argument is that even without these names “we feel that we are in the maddened whirlwind of black-eyed sorcery” and could never imagine that “the frenzied intoxication by the terrifying SEVEN” could be taking place anywhere other than in the East. “Only with Eastern, Babylonian,
Assyrian, Judaic madness can one repeat in this way: ‘Seven, they are seven! Seven, they are seven!’ or, with the same despair [...] , with the same terror as the leprous Job, can one repeat the vain prayer: ‘Cast a spell on them!’”

For Bal’mont, the incantation articulates “the howl of Man among the cackles of the Demons.” In support of his claim that it combines both extremes of art (individual infinity versus national character), he presents it as an example of the “fusion at the crossroads” of two opposite worlds, in which “each line, like oracular utterances, speaks with penetrating and shattering duality, has two different meanings and gives one unified impression.” Significantly, the second verbal example of “race in art” that Bal’mont considers is taken from his “native Russian world” of folklore; he cites a Russian charm as evidence of the same fusion of two extremes reflected in the Accadian incantation. The “sense of the separate individual,” on the other hand, is best represented in modern lyric poetry; here Bal’mont cites his heroes, Poe, Maeterlinck, Heine and Fet, alongside whom he would no doubt also have ranged himself.25

We do not know if Prokofiev read this essay or discussed its ideas with Bal’монт; if he did, his attention would surely have been caught by the opening focus on music, followed by the comparison of the Accadian incantation to a Russian folk charm, presented as leading examples of the ancient mysteries of art to which contemporary lyric poetry should return. The evidence suggests that Prokofiev’s original interest in the incantation as well as the manner in which he set it were influenced by Bal’монт’s analysis of its significance; the poet’s emphasis on the conflict between the individual and the national spirit, for example, is clearly echoed in Prokofiev’s use of the contrast between the tenor and the choir. Bal’mont, for his part, certainly interpreted Prokofiev’s music in the light of his own understanding of the link between modern art and ancient cultures. In the poems that he addressed to Prokofiev in 1917 and 1921, he persistently emphasised the restless, innovative Scythian quality of the latter’s music.27 Later, in his 1927 memoir of the composer, he made a direct transition from the text of the Accadian inscription (cited in its first version) to a description of Prokofiev playing extracts from his newly composed musical setting of this work to Kusevitsky in Moscow in 1918, portrayed as the very incarnation of a Russian folk deity (an “illuminated Iarilo” or “mocking Perun”).28 In this way Bal’монт succeeded in presenting Prokofiev as the realisation of his artistic ideal: the renewal of modern art through a return to ancient mysteries and the spirit of Russian folklore.

Bal’монтаж returned once more to the Accadian incantation in Poezii kak volshebstvo (1915).29 Towards the end of this essay, he discusses a number of charms to illustrate the links between magic, music and poetry. As before, his first example is the Accadian incantation, cited on this occasion in a different version from the one published in 1908. The new version begins with the line “Seven, they are seven! Seven, they are seven!” (“Semero ikh! Semero ikh!”). Under the heading ‘Raznochenie vtoroe’ (‘Second Version’), this new rendering was later reprinted in the much expanded edition of Zovy drevnosti, published in Berlin in 1923, where it followed the original ‘Akkadiiskoe naprjazhenie: Raznochenie pervoe’ (‘Accadian Incantation: First Version’).30

Prokofiev used the new, second version of the incantation as the basis of Semero ikh. It seems extremely likely that he took its text from Poezii kak volshebство. His unpublished notebook of 1916–1917 includes two pages on which the first part of the incantation is copied out in a form that almost exactly corresponds to the text printed in Bal’mont’s 1915 booklet (Prokofiev’s handwritten copy reproduces two breaks in the layout of the text which do not
occur in any other editions). Moreover, the editions of Semero ikh published in 1922 and 1933 include four mysterious additional lines which do not appear in any of the published texts of the incantation; their source, however, can be found in the prose commentary that immediately follows the text of the incantation in Poezitii kak voshebty: “They reduce Heaven and Earth. They lock up countries, as with a door and bolts. They have no shame. They grind nations as these nations grind grain.”

If, as it appears, Prokofiev was familiar with Bal’mont’s essay, he may well also have been influenced by the interpretation of the incantation advanced in this work. As well as reiterating his earlier emphasis on the innate power of the text, Bal’mont made three new points of possible interest to Prokofiev. In his commentary on the incantation, he developed the characterisation of the seven evil spirits in a manner that suggests an association with the ubiquitous demonic spirits of Russian folk tradition. He also defined the incantation more precisely than before as a spell directed entirely “against the evil forces of Nature”. These observations pave the way for the transition to the two Russian charms which then follow, cited in poetic, literary form. Bal’mont defended this distortion of the original on the grounds that the addition of poetic form compensates for the loss of the “melodious voice” in which these charms would previously have been chanted. This comment may have prompted Prokofiev to restore the lost musical element of incantation, originally represented by the human voice, by setting the work to music for orchestra, choir and voice.

We can see, therefore, that the original Accadian incantation had accumulated several further layers of cultural “inscriptions” before it reached Prokofiev via Bal’mont. These readings must have affected Prokofiev’s approach to the text. He was probably first struck by its power, so strongly emphasised by Bal’mont, and then tempted to follow the poet’s prescription for modern art to renew itself by tapping the mystery of ancient cultures. He may also have been led to reflect on the individual artist’s relationship to the national spirit, on the links between Russian folklore and other ancient civilisations, and on the empowering force of magic, latent in music and poetry.

What about the relation of the incantation to the contemporary historical and political context? Was this a factor which determined Prokofiev’s interest in the work? In Russian culture cataclysmic historical events have commonly been interpreted as the manifestation of demonic forces which need to be exorcised. This tendency reached a peak among Symbolist writers in their responses to the wars and revolutions of 1904-1905 and 1914-1918. Bal’mont, for example, in common with many of his contemporaries, regarded the First World War as an act of “evil sorcery”. While it might be tempting to link Prokofiev’s interest in the exorcism of demonic forces to the historical situation of Russia at the time, enmeshed in the horrors of war and revolution (a view which has certainly coloured the reception of Semero ikh), it seems doubtful that Prokofiev himself followed this approach. Unlike the Symbolists, he did not strive to interpret current events in the light of his abiding interest in religion and mysticism. The letters that he wrote from the Caucasus while working on Semero ikh remain firmly focused on music; he was clearly mentally as well as physically detached from the revolutionary upheavals taking place in Russia. Although many years later, in his autobiography of 1941, he attempted to present his “desire to compose something great, cosmic” as a response to “the revolutionary events” in Russia which “demanded expression,” this was evidently a retrospective adjustment, reflecting the increasing pressure that he experienced after his final return to the Soviet Union in 1936 to align his work with official cultural policy.
When Prokofiev left Russia in May 1918, his thoughts were far from the Revolution: as he crossed Siberia by train on his way to Japan, he was still immersed in reading about Babylonian culture. He was also engaged in writing a remarkably entertaining story, ‘Bluzhdaiushchaia bashnia’ (‘The Wandering Tower’), which in many ways serves as an ironic comment on his relationship to ancient cultures and the modern world. The story features a learned French Assyriologist, Marcel Vautour, who has just returned to Paris after spending five years in Assyria, where he had “fallen entirely under the spell of the Accadians and the Sumerians, with the effaced superstitions of a once so stylish culture.” He returns with a private railway carriage, piled high with materials dug up in the deserts of Mesopotamia, but finds himself strangely unable to share his experiences with the worldly Parisians who eagerly await an account of his discoveries. That night a strange event occurs: the Eiffel Tower breaks loose from its foundations and strides off in the direction of Ancient Babylon. Vautour (note the “tower” in his name) sets off in hot pursuit and catches up with the tower in Germany, just as it is being tackled by the forces of General von Magenschmerzen (Belly-ache). At this critical juncture the hero takes a snakeskin-bound book from his pocket, utters a brief curse and then tears up the book; after this “his soul left the tower into which it had earlier migrated” and he and the tower both fly straight back to Paris. That night, Vautour sets fire to his flat and destroys his entire collection of Babylonian materials.

Prokofiev has made effective use of Maiakovskiy’s technique of treating a highly imaginative hyperbolic metaphor (here, the comparison of the protagonist’s soul to a galloping tower) as a literal truth, built up into the basis of a parodic plot. Although his story adopts the tone of a light-hearted fantasy, the parallels between the author and his hero invite more serious speculation. The previous autumn Prokofiev had also travelled to a remote and primitive land (the Caucasus) where he had immersed himself in the world of ancient cultures and Accadian incantations. Now, rumbling his way on a train journey across Siberia to Japan, bound for his new life in America, was he perhaps comparing his soul, still caught up in the world of Ancient Babylon (about which he continued to read so avidly), to a runaway tower, which would have to be brought back down to earth in the contemporary world through an act of exorcism? We should also recall that the image of the tower, taken up in the title of the story and the surname of its hero, was central to symbolist aesthetics and epitomised by Vsevolod Ivanov’s bashnia, the heart of St Petersburb literary life during the heyday of symbolism. It is therefore entirely possible that Prokofiev was offering a humorous comment on his ambivalent relationship with the “wandering tower” of the symbolist legacy and its passion for esoteric and primitive ancient cultures—a relationship characterised by a complex blend of strong attraction and ironic detachment (hence his fascination with motifs of enchantment and exorcism).

In his letter of 12 December 1922 to the music critic Pierre Souvchinsky, Prokofiev turned to the example of Bal’mont to clarify his understanding of modernity in art and the artist’s relationship to contemporary life. In all his multiple facets—whether as the author of “astounding translations” (Prokofiev cites the Accadian and Malayan incantations), or as the creator of “stunning mystic pictures,” or as an unparalleled master of verbal music—Bal’mont always remained for him a “pillar, standing outside time.” Prokofiev’s brilliant invective against Souvchinsky’s notion of “modernity” or “contemporaneity” [sovetennost] as a value in itself or meaningful criterion for the assessment of art is fuelled by a profound scorn for the reduction of art to historical contexts and notions of contemporary relevance. This did not mean that Prokofiev’s art was not modern or contemporary; it simply meant that his modernity was achieved through an immersion in the eternal dimensions of the spirit, captured in art. The example of Semeno ikh suggests that Prokofiev had absorbed this lesson,
from Bal’mont’s poetic world. Bal’mont’s belief in the intrinsic connection between music and magic, articulated in poetry, continued to exert an indirect influence on Prokofiev’s later work, as can be seen from the libretto and music of his opera *Ogennyi angel* (*The Fiery Angel*), based on Briusov’s novel of demonic possession and exorcism.42

Notes
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7 ‘Avtobiografija S S Prokof’eva’ (1941), 144.


12 Briusov’s early comments on Bal’mont are cited in the introduction to ‘Perepiska s K D Bal’montom. 1894–1918,’ ed A A Ninov and R L Shcherbakov, in *Literaturnoe*


14 For political reasons, related to the publication of his anti-tsarist verse, Bal’mont judged it prudent to leave Russia in January 1906; until his return to Russia in the spring of 1913, he spent the next seven years in self-imposed exile, based in France.

15 Bal’mont’s social circle at this time included many musicians and composers. According to the memoirs of his second wife, he was closest to three figures in the musical world: Skriabin, Prokofiev and Kusevitsky. E A Andreeva-Bal’mont, Vospominanija, ed A L Panina, Moscow, Izd imeni Sabashnikovykh, 1996, 341.


17 Poezija kak voskhodstvo, 19, 25, 71.

18 See the first, fourth and fifth poems of op 36 (‘Zaklinanie vody i ognia,’ ‘Pomni menia’ and ‘Stolby’).

19 K D Bal’mont, Zovy drevnosti. Gimny, pesni i zamysly drevnikh, St Petersburg, Panteon, 1908, 73–74 (text), 206 (note). The publishing-house Panteon included this collection in its popular World Literature series, printing two editions at the same time: an ordinary edition, costing one rouble and fifty kopecks, and a cheap one at the bargain price of forty kopecks with a high print-run of 3600 copies (striking evidence of Russia’s unlimited appetite for foreign cultures).

20 The connection between the Accadian incantation and the research of the German Orientalist, Hugo Winckler (1863–1913) is not mentioned by Bal’mont in any of the editions of Zovy drevnosti. Winckler was a prominent Assyriologist and archaeologist, who published numerous studies of Babylonian culture in German in the 1890s and 1900s. In his memoir of 1927, ‘O Sergeye Prokof’ev’e,’ Bal’mont for the first time provides some background information on this connection. He relates the incantation to a number of ancient cuneiform inscriptions, discovered during archaeological excavations in Mesopotamia, adding that the inscription that he rendered into Russian was found on the wall of an Accadian temple and is often cited in the works of the famous Assyriologist Winckler. Bal’mont’s memoir (as well as earlier conversations with Prokofiev, no doubt) was probably the source from which Prokofiev took the reference to Winckler that he included in his account of the genesis of Semero i kh in his autobiography of 1941. Bal’mont sent his memoir of Prokofiev to his daughter in Moscow, with a view to publication; his daughter evidently passed the memoir to Prokofiev during his visit to the Soviet Union in January-March 1927, a hypothesis which would explain the presence of the memoir in Prokofiev’s archive, neatly identified in the composer’s handwriting.

21 For an extract from the original article (Slovo, no 514, 20 July 1908), see ‘Perepiska s K D Bal’montom,’ 1:200 (note 13).
Ivanov’s ingenious neologism (obal’monchivaet) is modelled on the form of the verb obmachtivat’, obnochit’, meaning ‘to wet’ or ‘to soak’. For the record of Ivanov’s conversation with his student M Al’tman, see M S Al’tman, Razgovory s Viacheslavom Ivanovym, comp and ed V A Dymshits and K Ju Lappo-Danilevskii, St Petersburg, Inapress, 1995, 66–67.

For the text of Bal’mont’s letter to Briusov, see ‘Perepiska s K D Bal’montom,’ 1:194–96. Bal’mont’s preface to Zovy drevnosti was dated “Dolina berez, 13 February 1908.” “Dolina berez” (“valley of birches”) is his translation of the Flemish place-name Berkendael, where he spent a few months in hospital from January to April 1908.

Ibid, 1:199.

‘Chuvstvo rasy v tvorchestve,’ in K Bal’mont, Morskoe svechenie, St Petersburg and Moscow, Izdanie T-va M O Vol’f, [1910], 6–8.

In Poezii kak volshebstvo, 83, 86, Bal’mont presents Poe and Fet as his immediate predecessors with regard to musicality in literature.

See the reference to “svety / Stepogo kovylia” in ‘Rebenku bogov, Prokof’evu’ (9 August 1917), first published in 1919 without the dedication to Prokofiev, in Bal’mont, Stikhovorenia, ed VI Orlov, 481–82. In his 1927 memoir of Prokofiev, Bal’mont cites his sonnet, ‘Likuiushchii pozhar bagrianogo tsveta,’ written in 1921 after hearing the Third Piano Concerto, dedicated to him by Prokofiev. The sonnet ends with an evocation of Prokofiev as the incarnation of the “nepobedimiy Skif”.

Mstislav, ‘O Sergey Prokof’ev (Pis’mo iz Frantsii).’ A copy of this memoir, prefaced by a brief explanatory description in Prokofiev’s handwriting, is held at the Serge Prokofiev Archive, Goldsmiths College, London. I am grateful to the Curator, Noëlle Mann, for kindly providing me with a copy. Although the original Russian memoir has not been published, an English translation appeared in Three Oranges, no 2, November 2001, 12–13. It is curious that Bal’mont cites the first version of the Accadian incantation in his memoir, rather than the second version used by Prokofiev in his musical setting; perhaps this was a symptom of haste or failing memory.

Poezii kak volshebstvo, 72–75.

K D Bal’mont, Zovy drevnosti. Gimny, pesni i zamysly drevnikh, Berlin, Slovo, 1923, 319 pp, 115–18 (texts of both versions), 308 (note). In the preface to the new edition, written in Brittany at St Brévin-les-Pins and dated spring 1922, Bal’mont includes the second version of the incantation in his list of seven additions to the new edition, followed by the information that it was used “as the theme in the magnificent symphony [sic] of S S Prokofiev, published by S A Kusevitsky”. The note to the incantation at the end of the volume is identical to that in the first edition.

A copy of the manuscript notebook (44 pp) is held at the Serge Prokofiev Archive, Goldsmiths College, London. I am grateful to the Curator, Noëlle Mann, for helpfully providing me with a copy. The incantation is one of the latest entries in the notebook (on pp 40–41). It comes between a poem by Prokofiev dated 18 July 1916 (on pp 24–27) and the last item in the notebook, a poem by Prokofiev dated 31 December 1917 (on p 44); it is therefore probable that it was transcribed at some point between these two dates, i.e. in the second half of 1916 or in 1917. The text of the incantation published in Poezii kak volshebstvo is forty-two lines long. Prokofiev copied out the first half: twenty-one lines from the first twenty-five lines of Bal’mont’s text (omitting five-and-a-half lines but writing one line out as two lines). This was the text which he used in his musical setting, with only slight changes and a few additions.

Sergei Prokof’ev, Semero ikh (K Bal’mont: Zovy drevnosti). Kantata dla dramaticeskogo tenora, smeshannogo khora i bol’shogo orkestra, Moscow,

33 'Oni umen' shaiut Nebo i Zemlu. Zapiraiut, kak dever'iu i zasovami, strany. Ne imeiut styda. Meliut narody kak eti narody meliut zerno' (Poeziia kak volshebstvo, 74). In the 1922 and 1933 editions of Prokofiev's Semero ikh, four new phrases taken from this passage are introduced in slightly modified form and in a different order into the middle section sung by the tenor, beginning 'Blagotvoren'ia ne znaeiu oni'.

34 Further evidence of Prokofiev's familiarity with Bal'mont's booklet can be found in the following parallel. Bal'mont follows the Accadian incantation with a discussion of Russian sorcerers and Malayan exorcisers (75) and then cites the text of the Malayan incantation known as 'Pomni menia' (81–82); Prokofiev, after using the Accadian incantation in Semero ikh, set the Malayan incantation to music alongside a Russian charm in op 36 (1921).


37 See comments such as "My dear friend, having received a telegram from Petrograd that there will be no concerts, I decided to stay put and not to rush off anywhere" (14 November 1917) or "For the moment everything is going along as it has been, that is, just fine, or rather—extremely well. The next incitement to leave for Petrograd are Ziloti's concerts" (20 November 1917), in Prokofiev's letters from Kislovodsk to E Damskaia, in Selected Letters of Sergei Prokofiev, trans and ed H Robinson, 33.

38 ‘Avtobiografia S S Prokof’eva’ (1941), 159.

39 Ibid, 162.


42 See, for example, Prokofiev's repeated insistence on the crucial importance of the element of magic in the opera in his letter of 18 June 1926 to his collaborator on the libretto, Boris Demchinsky: "You've completely removed from the Ruprecht/Renata relationship the element of magic and the role that it has played in their life, yet the study of magic is the core upon which the whole story is built." "I don't know if you're aware of what an important part magic played in Burirov's life." Sergei Prokofiev, 'Letter to Boris Demchinsky,' Three Oranges, no 3, May 2002, 16, 17. The link between the two works is also reinforced on a musical level; Seven, They are Seven anticipates The Fiery Angel in its use of powerful choral ostinati; see Noëlle Mann, "Breathless With Excitement", 21.