

## SEMANTICS OF THE BASS REGISTER IN EUROPEAN MUSIC

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There are the semantic approach toward registers, specifically the low register of the human voice and musical instruments in the article. The low register sound accumulated a large semantic potential. It performs aesthetic roles (the accompaniment foundation, expressively important component of the musical fabric, the creation of an artistic symbol), decides the kinds of musical artistic problems (portray the owner of the low register, a dynamic condition of activity). The low register can embody the dichotomies: the Beautiful and the Ugly, the Sublime and the Malign, the Tragic and the Comic.

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For a long time, European science has studied musical resources in the aspect of their semantics, i. e. their ability to convey meaning. Discussions on the sense-bearing potential of ancient musical modes date back to Aristotle and Plato. During the baroque period, the meter, beat, and tonality semantics were actively developed within the framework of the theory of affects. The semantic approach toward registers, specifically the low register of the human voice and musical instruments, can be rather valuable for music.

The low register is represented by a considerably wide range of sources: vocal (a male bass or a female contralto) or instrumental (a bass-clarinet or a double bass clarinet, a bass saxophone in B and a double bass saxophone in Es, a contra bassoon, a bass saxhorn, a bass or a double bass trombone, a tuba, a double bass or a sub double bass tuba, a helicon, a double bass, an acoustic bass guitar, an electric bass guitar, a large or a bass drum, a low pitched church or orchestra bell, kettle-drums, a tam-tam). Folk instruments also complement the palette of low-pitch sounds: a karnay, an Uzbek copper instrument; a Russian bass or double bass balalaika, and a bass or double bass domra; a bass mandolin; a Mexican guitarrón (a large acoustic bass guitar); a bugay drum (berbenitsa) in its Austrian and Hungarian variants; and others. The low registers of acoustic instruments with a wide audio frequency range (an organ, a piano, a bayan (Russian button accordion), etc.) and electronic instruments (OndesMartenot, a theremin, a synthesizer) complete the acoustic picture.

The low register imparts with such qualities as the depth of overtones, density, substantiality, rigor, gravity, humming, certain hoarseness, an elusive clearness of the high pitch to the sound, often amplifying volume or even adding harshness, or, on the contrary – dimness and low level of volume (e.g. in the case of double bass). These qualities are due to the large size and mass of the sound source, the acoustic properties of the

sound (oscillation quality and amplitude, longer acoustic attenuation period), and difficulties of phonation.

The low register sound accumulated a large *semantic potential*. Conceptual impulses of music elements (including the register) are more prone to deciphering as associated with the **Human**. Since ancient times, low-frequency sounds have been attributed to a human who could generate it – a middle-aged man with a solid social status. It is not coincidence that many bass opera parts are those of rulers (King Mark in *Tristan and Isolde* by Richard Wagner; Tsar Ivan the Terrible in the opera *A Lady from Pskov*, Tsar Saltan from the opera *A Fairy-Tale about Tsar Saltan*, Tsar Dodon from the opera *The Little Golden Cockerel* by Nikolai Rimski-Korsakov; Czech king Vladislav in the opera *Dalibor* by Bedřich Smetana) and meaningful or celebrated characters (Ivan Susanin in the eponymous opera by Mikhail Glinka, *Il Commendatore* in *Don Giovanni* by Wolfgang Mozart).

Serious lyrical and dramatic monologues in chamber vocal music are usually recited by the bass voice. It can convey such human traits as sensuality (the part of Polovets khan's daughter Konchakovna – in contralto), wisdom of the middle age (Basilio, the teacher of music in *The Barber of Seville* by G. Rossini; the Old man in *Aleko* by S. Rachmaninoff; prince Gremin in *Eugene Onegin* by P. Tchaikovsky).

In all these cases, a person is characterized by means of its *speech*. Such deep sincere sharing quite often bears the meaning of author's monologues, uttered on behalf of the composer. They are also modelled in instrumental music by recitatives of low-pitch string instruments – cellos and double basses (in symphonies by L. Beethoven).

Bass register is also used in instrumental music to indicate that the character *is walking*. Steady and measured low register beats call for such association (example № 1: Chopin. Nocturne

C-Minor). Unsteady beats usually serve the purpose of conveying the specifics, how the person walks specifically (slow, heavy, difficult steps – a funeral procession in *The Musical Moment h-moll* op. 16 № 3 for piano by Sergey Rachmaninoff – example № 2). Low-pitch string instruments sound solidly in various tempo-gravitational models like a steady easy stride, plodding, etc.

Conceptual impulses of the low-pitch register also immerse the listener into **the World**, the human environment. The surrounding space is sonically materialized through such vibrations that stay beyond the acoustic abilities of human singing and speech. For example, they are associated with the imagined existence – the cosmic space (in the limitlessly long reverberating beginning of the symphonic the Planets suite by Gustav Holst). The world enters the musical opus with the striking of the clock heard in the lifelessly automated repetition of the low piano sound in the Variations on StilleNacht theme by Alfred Schnittke for violin and piano. This may also include associations with the real life, evoked by the imitation of the low-pitched church bell; they are frequent in the works of Sergey Rachmaninoff (for example, at the beginning of the Second concerto for piano with orchestra – example № 4); and found in Modest Mussorgsky's oeuvres – his orchestral Intro to the opera Khovanshchina, for instance.

Beyond the Man's limits, there is also the field of abstract categories. Among them, *the movement* as a mode of existence stands out. The absolutized energy of the pure abstract movement reigns in jazz improvisations, the double bass being well known to carry and conduct the motion energy.

Finally, along with the Man and the World another scope of senses – **the Music** itself – appears. It includes the sphere of musical elements, composers' and performers' ways for using these elements, the fund of musical genres, styles, techniques. The sphere of Music is constantly actualized as the traditional solidity of the low register. Most frequently, the Music is openly manifested as the demonstration of the performer's mastery. Here, the reproduction of the archetypical model of *singing* on an instrument inappropriate for this as the embodiment of the lyric can be pointed out. This model is used in Ludwig Beethoven's theme of joy (example № 5), Paul Erhard's transcription of Sergey Rachmaninoff's Vocalise, where the high-pitch human vocal is substituted with the double bass cantilena.

The other side of Music is revealed in the demonstration of *virtuosity* on a heavy "awkward" massive instrument – the command of the technique as the indicator of the performer's

mastery. It is easy to notice that "purely" (exclusively) musical assignments are quite harmoniously related to "non-musical" senses: the low-register cantilena is easily combined with the task of embodying the human principle, while the virtuosity happens to be the reverse side of the motion energy. In other words, various conceptual fields – the Man, the World, the Music – naturally merge in the same musical theme.

Let's proceed to *aesthetic roles* assigned to the low register.

*The accompaniment foundation* must be the most natural and simple aesthetic role of the low register. In this case, the low register focuses on a modest, inexplicit, impersonalized sound, serving as the basis for the homophone-harmonious texture and harmony. The low register as the basis of an ensemble's sound or orchestral polyphony – this is the role played by the ancient viola da gamba, also regularly performed by the double bass.

A more aesthetically interesting use of the low register can transform low-frequency sound into an *expressively important* component of the musical fabric. This is the case of the low vocals leading the Basso ostinato line. In Choir № 16 Crucifixus from the Mess *h-moll* by Johan Sebastian Bach, the low-frequency layer of the texture is not only the foundation of harmonic verticals. Multiple repetitions of the descending melodic line, defining the cadential closure, imparts the semantics of decay, withering, and perishing (example № 6). Not only the full lower register but also its separate phrasings can make a great aesthetic impression (example № 7 – Beethoven. Symphony № 5, part 3).

Among aesthetic roles of the low-register sounding, such an important one as the *creation of an artistic symbol* should be pointed out. Proclamations of doom are the most convincing in the low register. Persistent hits or rigid rhythm formulae with the beat being split into shorter values in the double bass parts are quite common for the Fate themes. Such signs are found in the final of the overture to the Carmen opera by George Bizet (example № 8), in the musical characteristics of Il Commendatore Statue in Don Giovanni by Wolfgang Mozart and The Stone Guest by Alexander Dargomyzhsky, and the leitmotif of Fate in The Ring of the Nibelung by Richard Wagner (example № 9). The similar themes are used to embody the inexorable sacred principle – this the trait of the oracles in Idomeneo by Wolfgang Mozart, Norma by Vincenzo Bellini, Aida by Giuseppe Verdi, and Dosifey – the leader of Raskolniki (the Free Churchmen) – in Khovanshchina by Modest Mussorgsky.

The most significant question arising in the process of studying the semantics of the low register must be the one on the kinds of musical *artistic problems* this instrument solves. Let's outline their most widespread figurative and artistic types in the musical art.

Let's start with an artistic situation, where we need to *portray* the owner of the low register. The artistic self-sufficiency of the low register is observed in multiple concertos for double bass with the orchestra (Paganini of the Double Bass by Giovanni Bottesini, Franz Joseph Ceper, Sergey Kusevitsky, Frantisek Gregora, Johannes Matthias Sperger, Domenico Dragonetti, and other authors) as well as comparatively less frequent double bass solos. Here the sound of the low-pitch string instrument is present extensively and profoundly, allowing the source of the sound to speak for itself. Leaping ahead, let me say that the portrayal of a massive and low sounding instrument became a productive creative idea for a wholesome musical and theatrical creative work – the Double Bass mono-opera by Grigory Korchmar, which I will cover a bit later. Moreover, it received its logical continuation in another kind of creativity – literature, namely Anton Chekhov's Romance with a Double Bass short story, Patrick Susskind's A Double Bass, Dmitry Yemets' Tanya Grotter and a Magical Double Bass. Let me add that the low register also convincingly portrays a specific, individualized *fantastic image*, like the Head in Ruslan and Lyudmila, the part of which is sung by a low male vocals choir with an octave span. This role is also well carried out by the solos of rare – extraordinary – low sounding instruments (bass clarinet, contrabassoon, and others).

Along with the static portrayal, the low register can also embody the opposite thing – a dynamic condition of *activity*. At the beginning of the final of Ludwig Beethoven's 9<sup>th</sup> symphony, vigorous replicas of cellos and double basses are included into the dialogues with other members of the orchestra (example № 10).

The low register can embody and encompass the concealed, deeply hidden meanings. Discovering these implications and comprehending the goals assigned is possible by means of the typology of aesthetic categories constituting the dichotomies. Let's look at them.

*The Beautiful and the Ugly*. The low register is used in both mentioned polarities. In music, we can find the idealization of the low register and its owner. This happens, for instance, during the demonstration of the double bass virtuosity in the transcription of Flight of the Bumble Bee by Nikolai Rimski-Korsakov. The high mastery of the performance and the

irrepressible creativity of the bass musician delight the listener of the jazz improvisation. In some genres of the rock music (heavy metal), the antipode – the embodiment of the ugly, gross, and even unaesthetic – can be played by the bass sound reduced to the level of noise.

*The Sublime and the Malign*. It might seem that low sounding is brutal and stands for the Malign. Such correlation really exists (e.g. in the beginning of the sonata for accordion De Profundis by S. Gubaidulina with low vibrations coming as if from the underworld), the part of Mephistopheles the Fallen Angel in Faust by Charles Gounod. The low register, however, also serves the opposite purpose – to represent the Sublime. Here, we are reminded of the traditions of the God-worshipping liturgical singing of the Gregorian Choral. The same is true for the Old-Russian liturgical singing: the sound of the male choir is acoustically perfect and rich in overtones not owing to the profoundly-sounding low vocals, but also to the lowest voice – *basso profundo* (those that possess the voice that low are called oktavists since they can sing an octave below other basses).

*The Tragic and the Comic*. Another dichotomy is well-represented in music. The tragic depth and significance mark the monologues of such opera characters as Ivan Susanin and Boris Godunov. The comic effect is achieved by overcoming the established tradition of demonstrating the worth and the meaningfulness of the pieces performed by the bass-register human voice. The hurry-scurry speech of the bass-register performers in Italian operas elicits a smile. The same reaction is expected from listening audience of the characters of the comic opera parts, such as Leporello in Don Giovanni by Wolfgang Mozart, doctor Bartolo in the Barber of Seville by Gioachino Rossini, Tsar Dodon and military commander Polkan in The Little Golden Cockerel by Nikolai Rimski-Korsakov, Farlaf in Ruslan and Lyudmila by Mikhail Glinka. The use of musical instruments beyond the limits of creative clichés sounds equally amusing. Take the playful and clumsy waltz melody of the double bass with the overlaid piano accompaniment in play № 5 “The Elephant” from “The Carnival of the Animals” by Camille Saint-Saens (example № 11) for example.

So, we have highlighted the great artistic potential of the low register, including the sound of the double bass. However, different musicians would use it differently. Let's consider how the double bass is interpreted by one of the most outstanding composers of Saint-Petersburg, our contemporary Grigory Korchmar in his monodrama the Double Bass.

About the composer.