

**A conversation with symphonism through a poetry performance**  
**“So, What Is Your Question”**  
***(work-in-progress in collaboration with Sara Maino)***

The article studies the manifestations of symphonism in a poetry show 'So, What Is Your Question'.

**Keywords:** symphonism, laws of a musical composition, method of artistic thinking, sonata-symphonic cycle, polyphony, rhythm, counterpoint

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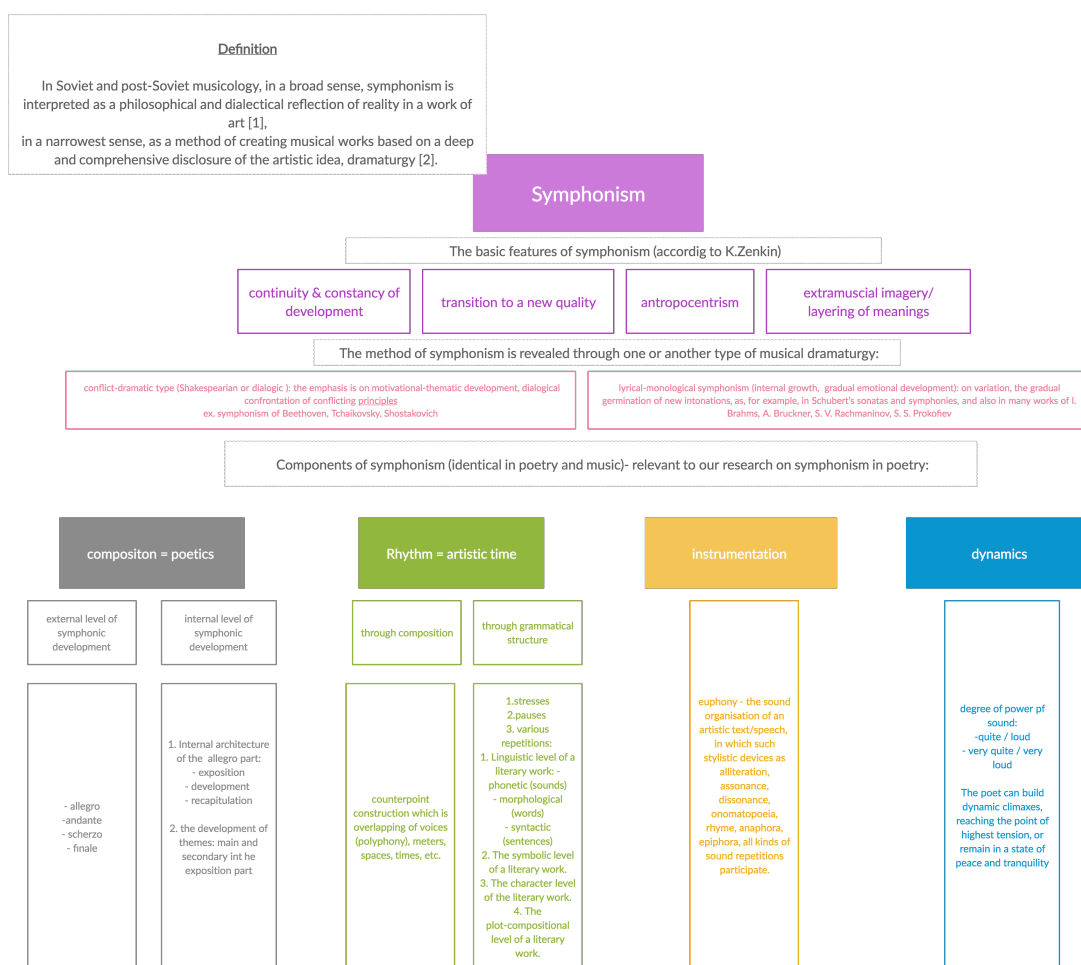
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The author of the article tries to analyse the way symphonism is applied as a creative method of composition in a certain lyric poetry piece and the theatric performance of it. This includes both: (1) the ideological side (content) and (2) the special formation of the internal organization of the artistic work (form). The author proves the hypothesis that in the named composition - 'So, What is Your Question' - the structure of a symphonic cycle and the music qualities are reproduced distinctively enough. The given statement is proved to be true both by the judgements of the authors of the performance and by detailed comparison of various parts of «So, What Is Your Question» with the structure of a classic 3-movement symphony.

In the first part, we will analyse the realisation of the method of symphonism that occurs through symphonic dramaturgy, the main feature of which is such logic, in which each successive phase-contrast or repetition follows from the previous one but at a new level, carrying out the development 'according to spirals'. Briefly, this can be denoted as: thesis - antithesis - synthesis.

In the second part, we will delve into the internal symphonic composition of the work (the composition of the first part in a sonata form: an exposition, a development, and a recapitulation) and the musical methods of repetition, contrapunct, etc.

All in all, in this reflection, we will try to cover all 5 features (aspects) of lyric poetry that the author is focused on in her PhD research, which are:

- form;
- music qualities;
- figurative language;
- non-narrative, vertical investigation of the situation;
- and the first-person point of view.

### **Intro: ‘So, What Is Your Question’**

‘So, What Is Your Question’ is a 2019-formed collaboration between the two artists Sara Maino (Italy) and Marina Kazakova (Belgium). Sara Maino is multimedia artist, performer and director (theatre, video, installations, poetry and research). Marina Kazakova is a Russian-born Belgium-based poet-performer.

#### **SO, WHAT IS YOUR QUESTION**

A performance in three acts,  
which is a reflection on a  
creative relationship and  
process.

A poetic dialogue / made  
visible / through interactions  
with oneself, with the other,  
with the audience.

By and With  
Marina Kazakova & Sara Maino



‘So, What Is Your Question’ is a live poetry performance in three acts, which is a poetic reflection made visible through interactions with oneself, with the other, with the audience.

On the whole, the performance “So, What Is Your Question” is uneventful. The plot boils down to a dialogue between the two poets: Sara Maino and Marina Kazakova. The main conflict is the clash of the visible and the invisible, the inner and the outer, the internal and the external worlds.

*On the stage: a square table and two chairs.*

*The table is in the center of the stage, the two chairs are one in front of another.*

*On the table: a typemachine Olivetti Lettera 32; a small speaker connected to an audio system; a pile of white paper hands cut by hand; a feather or two; Greek incense, a coal disc, a matches box, a little stone from a garden, a leaf or two; a table light.*

*In the first act, the two poets interact by reciting poems and doing some actions: few movements on the stage - as in the case of Marina, typing words on the machine - Sara.*

*In the second act: they move the chairs around the table. The audience is invited to receive the instant poetry created by Sara on the type machine: one for each person sitting in front of her. Marina observes the action.*

*In the third act, the two poets move the chairs around the table again. Now they interact by looking each others, one in front the other, by reciting poems and doing a unique action: touching the hands.*

*At the end of the performance, they leave the stage by switching on the sound installation on the table: the type machine is speaking poetic words in Italian, English and Russian, as an echo of what has already happened.*

The point of departure of their artistic creation is (1) the internal monologue of the protagonist, (2) the interplay of the two selves (two poets) as well as (3) the interplay between the performing poet and the audience. The duet reflects on the idea of a conversation as the core of a creative process, dialogic structure as the heart of our creative thinking, and also of building relationships. The authors show poetry as a response to our inner selves, poetry as a response to the presence of someone else in our lives, poetry as a response of a human being to the universe, in general.

The plot of “So, What Is Your Question” boils down to a monologue seen through a dialogue between two poets: Sara Maino and Marina Kazakova. The main conflict is the clash of the visible and the invisible, the inner and the outer, the internal and the external worlds.

### **Part 1: The realisation of the method of symphonism that occurs through symphonic dramaturgy: the external level of symphonism**

We have already defined the symphonic development in the artistic work as a whole in such philosophical categories as the dialectic of the development of opposite principles and their unity (the dialectic of synthesizing development).

In turn, this dialectic of the development of the opposites can be expressed in both: “internal” and “external” levels of symphonism. This can be found in the following.

The external level of symphonism in the work is expressed in the contrasting interaction of the first part of Allegro (with its more complex internal structure) with the subsequent parts of the cycle - Andante, Finale (Con Moto).

The internal level of symphonism in the work is traced in the compositional structure of the first part 'Allegro': exposition, development and recapitulation. In addition, the internal dynamics and the rhythm and the tempo of each part is emphasized by the content, composition and various musical techniques, corresponding to the specifics of each part. We will talk about the internal level of symphony in the second part of the article.

One of the elements of the implementation of the method of symphonism by the authors was the dramaturgy that reflects the dialectical development and interaction of ideas: thesis - antithesis - synthesis. This is characteristic to the symphonic development of the piece: from contrast to synthesis.

In the first part (thesis), we see the poet's outer - the observer, who's dreams, thoughts and imagination are verbal and out loud.



In the second part (antithesis), we see the inner, claiming its place and revealing itself through the smell, the emotion of fingers over a typewriter, through the poet's eyes and, most importantly, through her magic interaction with the spectators.



In the final part (synthesis), there should be revealed the balance between the two: the visible (Marina Kazakova) and the invisible self (Sara Maino), the poet and the spectator, us and the universe. Here, the poets appear in multiple superimposed positions, focusing our attention on the problem of the balance.



As in a classic symphony, we see the progression from Homo agens (part 1: allegro), through Homo sapiens (part 2: andante) to Homo ludens and Homo communicus (part 3: finale - con moto).

The contrast of the parts is manifested both in the ideological aspect, and in the audio-visual representation of the content on stage. Due to the cyclic format, the action moves from character 1 to character 2 and then to the face-to-face interaction of the characters. Based on this, the method of symphonism allows the authors to reflect the different facets of one's 'I' and its relation with the outer world due to the specifics of each part of the cycle, the facets, which develop and interact with each other.

In this case, we are dealing with the lyric-monological type of symphonic drama, where the development of the cycles is aimed at internal growth, the unity of the emotional development of the artistic images. It is due to the fact that we are working with 'symphonism in lyric poetry', and one of the features of lyric poetry is non-narrative, vertical investigation of the situation. It is opposed to the horizontal development in traditional narratives of drama, which appears very often in direct forward-backward action. Vertical investigation, on the other hand, does not move forward or backward, but rather upward and downward. Example: literary speaking, what happens in our poetry piece is the movement of thought and feeling, not so much visible to the outer world. Therefore, the performance boasts almost no action and is focused mostly on eye play, hand play, body gestures and the sounding of the performers.

By borrowing the fundamental principle of symphonism, ideologically speaking, the authors tried to create a work - a philosophical embodiment of one's "I" in the sounds of dark and light pages, pages of eternal struggle, doubts, sorrow of the inner "I", among which joy and happiness flicker like a fleeting lightning flash.

Not only structural, but also substantial (content) features of "So, What is Your Question" bring it closer to the symphonic cycle. According to Becker, the symphony as a genre "is for the artist a way of communication with a wide range of perceiving masses with the help of instrumental music. The artist, when creating the plan of the symphony, along with this creates the ideal picture of an audience actively sympathizing with him" [35]. This statement by the German musicologist P. Becker about the symphony may well be applied, in our opinion, to "So, What is Your Question", where the image of the "participating audience" is recreated extremely vividly through the direct involvement of the audience in the performance. The text of the work contains a clear idea of the "perceiving side", the image of which appears in the first poem, when the author turns to the muse, and plays an important role throughout the cycle. Authors constantly speak to the other selves and the muse, then to each other, then to the audience.

Thus, "So, What is Your Question", where the image of an active listener is recreated, fully corresponds to the definition of the symphony "as a means of organized communication between the composer and the mass" [36]. The statement of P. Becker that "he [the composer] creates in his imagination at the same time an ideal picture ... of the perceiving mass" [35, p.19], as it seems, can be fully applied to "So, What is Your Question".

The stage space in the performance is by no means limited to the stage alone. It is changing between the 2 perspectives, the external and the internal, as well as it involves the spectator who is either a part of the scenography or sitting in front of the poet who is writing a poem, here and now, for the spectator. In this interactive part of

the show (Second part 'Andante') the poets pose the following questions: which role does the audience, the spectator involved have in the action of being observed? Does he/she have any questions at all?

The symphonism (and more broadly musicality) of “So, What is Your Question” is also evidenced by the fact that all the poems of each part of the symphony, as well as the parts of the symphony, are meaningfully connected by a continuous vertical investigation of the situation, continuous narrative. Various themes and motives smoothly replace each other, and a harmonious musical form is built up, not torn by interruptions in sound or movements.

## **Part 2: The internal symphonic composition of the artistic work and the musical techniques**

The first part is Allegro. In this part, we conventionally distinguish three layers that can be compared with the three-part sonata composition of Allegro.

1. The first layer is “exposure”. Here, the spectator sees Marina (the external ‘i’) standing in front of Sara (the internal ‘i’), back to back. So that, from the audiences' point of view, Marina is visible, Sara is quite hidden behind Marina’s body. We define Marina as “the main theme” (1). She appears in front of the audience against the background of Sarah’s back and folded umbrellas, which act as a “side theme”. Marina recites a poem standing still.

2. The middle layer - dominant over the entire first part - embodies the "development" layer of the Allegro. It is presented in a different perspective, more voluminous. Marina moves one step to the right, opening Sara’s back to the audience. In this part, the audience not only starts seeing Sara's back directly, but also hears her voice for the first time reciting the poem. Marina closes her eyes. Stands still in silence. Further on, Marina starts moving around the stage while reciting the texts, she takes one umbrella after another, opens them and puts them on stands. The audience sees white open umbrellas with “dripping paper hands hanging on them”. When opening the last umbrella, Marina takes one of the spectators by hand and brings her onto the stage.

In this regard, we note that the first "exposition" layer is static in nature, in turn, the "development" layer is characterised by dynamics, movement. This emphasises the contrast of these two layers in relation to each other.

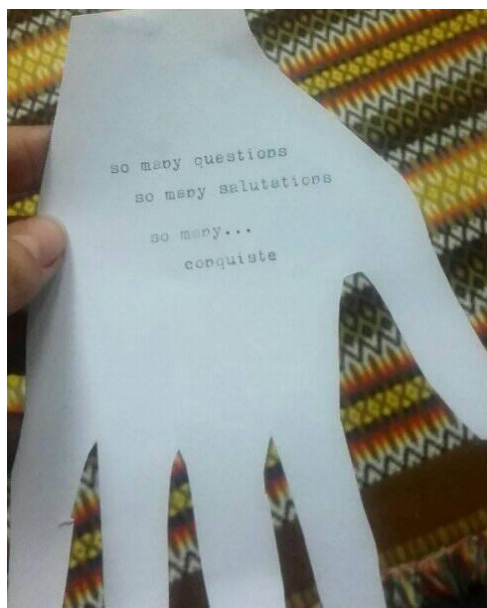
3. The third layer is “recapitulation”. We again return to the initial scene but from a different perspective: Marina stands still and recites a poem. But now she is not alone. Next to her stands the spectator. And she is not standing in the centre of the stage anymore. In the central part of the composition, among the paper hands and umbrellas arranged diagonally, is Sara’s back. The attention has shifted from Marina to Sara. The ‘reprise’ technique is used in this closing part: the poem ends with the same 4 lines it started:

"My hand trembles,  
I can scarcely write,  
I have so much

to say to you".

All these techniques, namely: the contrast of the main and side themes, three-layer sonata composition of Allegro part, the growth and the internal impulse in the "development" layer - are common to the methods of symphonism. We observe them in almost all classical sonatas of the Allegro part of the symphony.

The musicality and symphonism of "So, What is Your Question" is also revealed by the presence of leitmotifs in this cycle. One of the most obvious cross-cutting images of the story are hands: Hands that rain the truth. Hands that speak. Hands that speak the truth. Handshake as the first point of contact. Hands as articulators of inner rhythms. Hands as a fundament on which a relationship is developed. Hands are present in each of the three parts of the poetry piece: either paper hands, or the actors' real hands or hands typewriting the music. A short throw-back to one of the basic characteristics of lyric poetry - figurative language - which Marina is trying to translate in audio-visual medium. Here, the authors use paper hands and umbrellas to bring the dominating figures of the narrative forward. Another feature of lyric poetry - the first-person point of view/ a self-reflexive speaker - is also reflected in the performance. Since most of the poems are told in the first person, the authors directly put them into the mouths of each poet.



In addition, the very image of the author, which pervades the entire narrative, has the leitmotifical meaning, and plays the most active role in the first part of the performance and in the final part, while the middle part is dedicated to the interaction with the audience. Moreover, the first words of the performance are echoed in a sound installation at the end of the show as the memory of the already happened.

In general, the image of the lyric 'I' in "So, What is Your Question" is ambiguous. The relationship with oneself, with the muse and the audience is not easy, they are full of hidden drama. The 'I' speaks in three different languages: English - the external self, Italian -

the internal self, and Russian - the unconscious self. The authors' task is not to literally reproduce in their work the language they speak and write, but to understand and reflect the ideas of the work. It seems that this work of the authors with the languages is aimed at expressing a state adequate to what is happening in the human soul and mind.

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