

Fyodor Dostoyevsky and music

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Abstract: *Fyodor Dostoyevsky (1821-1881), one of the most important novelists of all times, lived with maximum intensity the Romantic century. Its importance in the evolution of art at the beginning of the twentieth century was determined by its major role in the great currents manifested, outlining a stylistic bridge between the realism of the 19th century and the modernity of the 20th century not only in literary art, but also in dramatic and cinematic art, from graphic arts to psychology. His relationship with music is also special in terms of his connection with the musicians of his time, but also with his favourite masterpieces.*

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1. Introduction

Fyodor Dostoyevsky (1821-1881), one of the most important novelists of all times, lived with maximum intensity the Romantic century: born in 1821, on the brink of the great revolutionary events that would transform European history and thinking, he died in 1881, after having endured great sufferance, which he rendered masterfully and authentically in his works.

“Of the great late nineteenth-century Russian novelists, Fyodor Dostoyevsky stands out for the dense series of intertextual references in his works to various writers, including Shakespeare, Cervantes, Friedrich Schiller, Honoré de Balzac, Alexander Pushkin, Nikolai Gogol, Victor Hugo, Charles Dickens, and many others. Along with these literary texts, Dostoyevsky incorporated numerous biblical and other religious writings into his works, while intensely engaging the major ideological, political, and religious currents of his time” (Burry A. 2019, 1).

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2. Fyodor Dostoyevsky: literature and music in romantic semantics (Tchaikovsky, Mussorgsky)

In direct and untimely contact with sufferance at all levels from early childhood, Dostoyevsky transposed in his creation as one of the great writers of the 19th century all these realities that no adult could have lived through at such intensity without being shaken.

From childhood he knew illness (first the illnesses that his father, as a doctor, treated, while living for a period in his father's hospital) then his mother's illness (tuberculosis, which led to her death when Fyodor was only 15 years old). Another tragic loss which marked his destiny irrevocably was his father's murder. For the rest of his life, he would search for faith (seriously affected by these tragedies assimilated by a child's soul), as well as for human kindness, in a world full of tension and injustice.

His relationship with Berlioz's music seems to be a complex one, as long as both paradigms refer to a very used model in romanticism (musical on the one hand, literary on the other): both authors reveal a discourse of a special complexity, with stratified multistructures, with characters who propose an exceptional psychological and musical-literary evolution (often on the border with realism).

As a student in the field of military engineering, he discovered – a little time before the half of the Romantic century – the world's great writers (Pushkin, Schiller, Shakespeare and Balzac), he left the academia and made his first literary attempts, noticed by the specialists who predicted a bright future for him. Present in the remarkable cultural circles of St. Petersburg, he had the opportunity to meet Anton Rubinstein and Glinka, situation which ended after the revolutionary year 1848, when the tsar forbade such gatherings. The members of such circles were arrested, sentenced to death initially, then to hard labour in Siberia.

His congenital epilepsy constantly worsened during those difficult years, spent in inhuman conditions, among people who did not understand his ambitions. Only 10 years later he was allowed to go back to St. Petersburg, in 1859, and he travelled often through Europe. His second marriage (from 1867) was to the woman who became the greatest support of his life, the mother of his four children, out of which only two survived. He then wrote the four novels which remain unique in the history of literature: *Crime and Punishment* (1866), *The Idiot* (1868–69), *The Devils* (1871–72), and *The Brothers Karamazov* (1878–80).

His childhood had afforded him unique meetings with great musicians: he had the chance to listen to: Liszt in St. Petersburg in 1843, the conductor H. Berlioz

in 1847, but also the artists of Marinsky Theater (1843–46), compositions which stayed in his heart forever (M. I. Glinka-Ruslan and Lyudmila).

Tchaikovsky's letters reflect the fact that Dostoyevsky impressed him deeply through a scene from the novel *The Brothers Karamazov* in which Zosima, receiving guests at the monastery, meets a woman who had lost her child. The composer concludes that: "it is much better to die yourself every day for a thousand years than to lose someone you love". However, Tchaikovsky remained deeply attached all of his life to Tolstoy, not to Dostoyevsky.

Researchers also have drawn parallels between Herman's portrayal in Tchaikovsky's *The Queen of Spades*, opera in 3 acts op. 68, from 1834 (based on the novel with the same name by Alexander Pushkin) and Raskolnikov from *Crime and Punishment*, and also between Maria's insanity at the end of Tchaikovsky's *Mazepa* and the final scenes of Prince Myshkin in *The Idiot*.

Dostoyevsky delivered a memorable speech at the unveiling of the monument dedicated to Pushkin, in 1880, which would influence Tchaikovsky's opera *Eugene Onegin*. Tchaikovsky had briefly met Dostoyevsky in 1864, but on that occasion (a year before he died), the great writer presented his own vision of Pushkin's lyrical novel with the same name. A classical creation of Russian literature at the beginning of the 19th century, it constantly emphasizes Onegin's life – victim of his own egotistical and proud life, in opposition to Tatiana – who personifies morality and integrity.

Trying to understand Tatiana's inner strength, Dostoyevsky had a different opinion than Tchaikovsky: the great writer praises Tatiana's moral integrity, a year before the premiere of Tchaikovsky's opera in Moscow, with indirect effects on it. Tchaikovsky's opera is entitled lyrical scenes in 3 acts, op. 24, being present in Moscow in the 1880s.



Fig. 1. P. I. Tchaikovsky, *Evgheni Onegin*, Letter scene (Tatiana)

In 1873, in St. Petersburg, Dostoyevsky managed a publication in which – the then young - Tchaikovsky published an unfinished series of articles under the title *Beethoven and His Time* (in fact, a small biography of the Bonn titan). His favoured composers included Beethoven (especially his *Pathétique Sonata* and the opera *Fidelio*). What other musician

could have better embodied his freedom aspirations if not the one who lived through music the depths of suffering, transformed through release and light?

It could not be a musical landmark closer to the Dostoyevsky ethos than the pathos of the composer who embodied the dramatic struggle of the opposites of this world. The Pathetic sonata announces the romantic complexity by joining the most acute oppositions, since the introduction that seems to belong to mature romanticism rather than the end of classicism. Breaking the discourse into points of maximum sensitivity, the transition from darkness to light, from the bass to the medium and acute register, from the strong to the subtle dynamics, from the slow to the fast discourse, are just as many arguments for the deep romanticism of this masterpieces, so close to Dostoyevsky's soul.

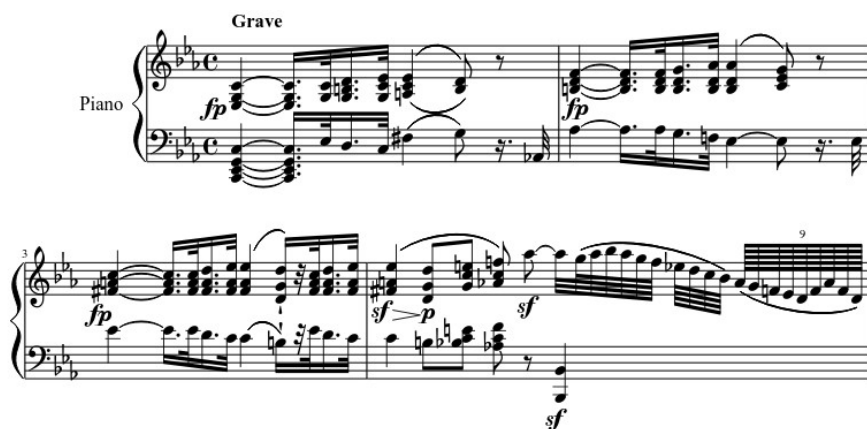


Fig. 2. L. van Beethoven, *Pathétique Sonata* (Grave, m. 1-4)

Russian musicology studied in detail Dostoyevsky's relationship with music, Abram Gozenpud (1908–2004) analyzed the topics related to music present in his works. Tchaikovsky and Mussorgsky were his contemporaries, while Janáček, Mahler, Stravinsky and Shostakovich among the younger, can be found through their ideas and music in the life of the famous writer. Investigating the relationship between Dostoyevsky and drama and music, Abram Gozenpud, an important Russian musicologist at the end of the 20th century (*Dostoyevsky and the Musical and Dramatic Arts*, 1981), underlines the affinities between Dostoyevsky and Mussorgsky (especially in the opera *Boris Godunov*), although the two were not close.

Modest Petrovici Mussorgsky (1839–1881) began his masterpiece in the field of opera as a member of the Group of five, as an innovator of the embodiment of the specifics of Russian music. The folklore and history of his country were continuous sources of inspiration, which is also reflected in his work, Boris

Godunov, but also in other works such as *Night on Bald Mountain* and the piano suite *Pictures at an Exhibition*.

Great Russian composer, with many important compositions left unfinished in the moment of death, ending in loneliness and poverty, Mussorgsky “discovered a way of writing for the voice that was both lyrical and true to the inflections of speech. He was the most strikingly individual Russian composer of the later 19th century and an avatar of modernism for the generation of Debussy and Ravel” (Oldani, el. ed.).

Borís Godunóv was the governor of Russia for 20 years at the end of the 16th century and was masterfully portrayed by Alexander Pushkin (in the play with the same name), which inspired S. Prokofiev, but also Mussorgsky. In his creations, one of the most famous episodes is the scene of the tsar’s coronation, with all its virtuosity.

Moderato ♩ = 92

11 Octatonic scale $A\flat^7$ D^7

Fig. 3. M. Mussorgsky, *Boris Godunov* opera (coronation scene)

In the first half of the 19th century, Pushkin's play was not approved for performance by the tsarist censor until 1866; however, Mussorgsky began work on his masterpiece before censorship allowed the subject to be used in musical works. Finishing the first version a year later, Mussorgsky used the style of opera dialogué (promoting the recitative with essential function), taking the text directly from Pushkin's play.



Fig. 4. M. Mussorgsky, *"Boris Godunov"* opera (Scenography by Shishkov, for the scene in the Tsar's palace in the Kremlin. Emerson, Oldani, 1994, p. 23)

Facing the same hostile fate of Pushkin's premiere, Mussorgsky's work was rejected by the Mariinsky Theater in 1871 for lack of a representative female role (which was later supplemented by the composer with the appearance of the role of Maryna), moving away from the original text of the play.

Immediately after starting work on his masterpiece, Mussorgsky actively joined the Group of Five - which highlighted the ethnic individualism, specific to Russian culture. Overcoming the ban on censorship to represent a tsar in a work, as a character, the opera benefited from its first audition. The tsar himself offered the agreement for the performance of the opera in 1874 in the very theater that had rejected it a few years before.

The voice of the main character (bass-baritone) is the one that supports the action of the opera, set in Russia and Poland between 1598-1605, musically transposed from four acts and a prologue - which suggests the sufferings of the oppressed people.

1
Andante. M.M. ♩ = 72.

Fag. Pic. incl.

Cl. B.

Cl. Fag.

Fig. 5. M. Musorgski, opera "Boris Godunov", prologue

3. Conclusions

Dostoyevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov*, along with Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina* (1877), served as "the culmination of the Russian realist novel, effectively exhausting the genre. His impact on succeeding Russian modernist movements, especially Symbolism, was substantial. Franz Kafka and Hermann Hesse (1877–1962), writers often associated with expressionism, also deeply felt Dostoyevsky's influence.

Kafka wrote in 1913 that he considered Dostoyevsky, along with Franz Grillparzer, Heinrich von Kleist, and Gustave Flaubert to be his true blood-relations. Dostoyevsky created (...) free, intensely self-aware, unpredictable characters who refuse to be subsumed under anyone else's viewpoint, including his own" (Burry 2019, 4).

Dostoyevsky's great, deeply dramatic characters are found in the heroic, pathetic, revolutionary, deeply individualized and confessional breath, typical of romanticism - including music. The great themes of the composers of the same period, with their dramatic scope, subject to internal contradictions and struggles, in a world that does not understand and do not assimilate these inner tragedies, are points of connection with the creation of the great Russian writer.

The exceptional inner polyphony of his characters places him among the most important writers in the history of universal literature: his novels reflect the social and spiritual crisis of tsarist Russia in the nineteenth century, investigating psychological areas of the deepest soul, insisting on the pathological states of mind - all lived by his characters by exploring extreme soul processes. In the same way, the great characters created by the musicians with whose music he developed a privileged relationship, respect the same coordinates of the polyphonic type complexity, of an acute, distorted expressiveness.

The series of researches dedicated to his work includes the analysis of some important elements that define both his creation and his relationship with the music he admired, commented on and tried to understand it as deeply as possible: "his religious and philosophical ideas, his influence on world literature, the realism, the dramatic qualities of his work, the novels as tragedies-all these aspects, and many more have already been well covered" (Peace 1971, VII). Thus, we discover how influences from various arts, from various stylistic spaces combine in culture, which always reflects unforgivable values: values which surpassed the ephemeral passage of time.

Its importance in the evolution of art at the beginning of the twentieth century was determined by its major role in the great currents manifested, outlining a stylistic bridge between the realism of the 19th century and the modernity of the 20th century not only in literary art, but also in dramatic and cinematic art, from graphic arts to psychology. His relationship with music is also special in terms of his connection with the musicians of his time, but also with his favourite masterpieces.

His relationship with music is a very special one, especially considering the fact that he did not benefit from a constant, methodical musical education. He had a special and profound understanding of the musical phenomenon both from the point of view of the personalities with whom he interacted or not (which he watched and admired from a distance), and from the perspective of the masterpieces he admired.

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