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From Index to Symbol: Echoes of Liszt in Tchaikovsky's Works

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TCHAIKOVSKY'S TOPICS

A lot has been written about Tchaikovsky's style, being established specific topics and stylistic features such as: the narrative and timbral characteristics, the gift of melody always in contrast with the composer's life, the double anchorage in the ethos of both Russian and Western music, the prevailing aesthetic values (the tragic and the pathetic among them – tailored in meanings impending death and farewell), the rhetoric processes (such as the prosodic quotation,¹ as well as the descending of many themes – *descensio*, with the semiotic function of index), together with the connection, not always visible, between Tchaikovsky's life and work. Nevertheless, beyond the obvious characteristics, there still remain secluded semiotic areas, with relevant meanings. This is because Tchaikovsky's works still allow various interpretations of the meanings suggested by their themes, narration or timbre in a certain context. Famous for being “psychological” and “transcendental”, the Russian composer's music hides underneath the lyrical discourse an impulse to generate connotations, and as such it remains intensely debated from the perspective of musical semiotics.

¹ A relevant example is that of the introduction of the verbal rhythm from the Orthodox funeral service in the arias of Lenski and Tatiana in *Yevgeny Onegin* (Wiley 2001).

UNDERSTANDING THE ALLUSIVE MUSICAL QUOTATION

Among the mechanisms triggering semiosis, in its pragmatic dimension, the musical quotation is extremely subtle, especially when it transforms itself under the innocent image of the allusion, away from the simplicity of unequivocal resemblance. Just like someone who, while whispering, manages to intrigue and attract the others' attention, the allusive quotation (as an indication) doubles our effort with curiosity in trying to find out (or merely imagine) what exactly motivates the author in his option. In this respect, the understanding of signifying acts is conditioned by the journey between the reading of the signs and their interpretation:

- i. knowing the topic components used by the composer, with its musical correspondent, stylistics;
- ii. connecting the information on the birth, the program and the source inspiring the analyzed work (historical thinking);
- iii. rhetoric-aesthetic analysis of the musical quotation (which becomes here a symbol in Peirce's understanding of return to the original meaning);
- iv. hermeneutic interpretation of the metamorphosis of the allusive quotation.

Adopting the perspective of this methodology in four steps (stylistic, historical, rhetoric-aesthetic and hermeneutic analysis), the present study aims to uncover the multiplicity of symbolic meanings which motivated Tchaikovsky to quote, in the main theme for Lenski's aria in *Yevgeny Onegin*, the main theme from Liszt's *Vallée d'Obermann*.

TCHAIKOVSKY-LISZT ANALOGIES

Tchaikovsky met Liszt during the first edition of the Bayreuth Festival, in the summer of 1876. They were bound by contradictory feelings toward one another, vacillating between admiration and rejection. However, Tchaikovsky orchestrated several of Liszt's works: the art song *Es war ein König in Thule* (after the poem by Goethe), in 1874, and the second section of *Evocation à la Chapelle Sixtine*, which is actually a piano transcription of Mozart's motet *Ave verum corpus*, and which became the third part (*Preghiera*) of the Orchestral Suite No. 4 *Mozartiana*, Op. 61, in 1887. In his turn, Liszt wrote a brilliant paraphrase of the Polonaise from act III of *Yevgeny Onegin* (1880).

In his articles, Tchaikovsky praises Liszt's religious music, comparing it to Beethoven's masses. Also, he analyses several other works by Liszt: *Années de pèlerinage, Première année: Suisse*, the *Christus* oratorio, the *Dante Symphony*,

the *Legend of St. Elisabeth* oratorio, Piano Concerto No. 2 in A major, the symphonic poem *Prometheus* and *Totentanz* (a paraphrase of *Dies irae*) for piano and orchestra. Nonetheless, he claims that Liszt has no creativity, despite his brilliant and sometimes even bombastic orchestral effects (see the *Dante Symphony*), mentioning in one of the letters addressed to Nadejda von Meck (December 1881), that Liszt's music leaves him cold. Besides, although Liszt had praised *The Variations on a Rococo Theme*, Tchaikovsky thought he was not an admirer of his work. The relationship between the two composers gains a new perspective in 1876 due to Eduard Hanslick's appreciations, as he considered Tchaikovsky one of "Liszt's disciples" (Franz Liszt" 2017).

TCHAIKOVSKY

The marriage to Antonina Milyukova

In July 1877, Tchaikovsky married Antonina Milyukova, but their marriage failed that same year, even if they never get divorced officially. The composer's biographers mention that the beginning of their relationship (early May 1877) coincides with the birth of Symphony No. 4 and of *Yevgeny Onegin*, both of them finished in 1877 in Italy, after the separation from Antonina ("Antonina Tchaikovskaya" 2017). The plot of Pushkin's novel has marked and influenced Tchaikovsky in his decisions, and the two works composed in that period gain biographic valences, being tied to the composer's unsuccessful marriage. "The parallels between life and art seem more than random" (Wiley 2001), as they seem the prophecy of an implacable destiny. The marriage to Antonina produced a crisis in Tchaikovsky's life, which analysts describe as: "impaired creativity, exploration of new genres, aimless wanderlust" (Wiley 2001).

Yevgeny Onegin (1877-78, rev. 1880)

Tchaikovsky chose the subject after talking to mezzo-soprano Yelizaveta Lavrovskaya. The opera uses original verses from Pushkin's novel,² but it does not follow the plot; it builds, dramatically and musically, a series of psychological scenes such as: Tatiana's aria (the letter aria) and Onegin's aria in act I, Lenski's aria in act II, the Polonaise and the ball scene in the final act.

Alexander Pushkin (1799-1837)

Considered to be the greatest Russian poet and the founder of modern literature, Pushkin became an inspiration for many composers: the poem *Ruslan*

² The libretto was written by Tchaikovsky, in collaboration with Konstantin Shilovsky.

and *Ludmila* inspired Glinka's opera, the play *Boris Godunov* (1825) becomes an opera by Mussorgsky, *Rusalka* inspires Dargomyzhsky, author of the homonymous opera, verses from the novel *Yevgeny Onegin* are to be found in Tchaikovsky's opera, while the novella *The Queen of Spades* is the inspiration for another one of Tchaikovsky's operas.

It is interesting to note that Onegin, the main character in Pushkin's novel, although a man about town, is also blasé and disgusted by people, just like a Russian replica of Childe Harold, Byron's somehow autobiographical character. It is also worth mentioning the fact that Lenski's faith, killed in a duel, seems to be an anticipation of Pushkin's death!

LISZT

In 1830, Liszt and Marie d'Agoult travel to Switzerland and Italy, while Liszt composes *Album d'un voyageur* (published in 1842). Between 1848 and 1855 Liszt looks back on the album, revises it and adds two more pieces, *Èglogue* and *Orange*, and renames it *Années de pèlerinage, Première année: Suisse*. The title *Années de pèlerinage* comes from Goethe's novel, *Wilhelm Meisters Lehrjahre*.

Vallée d'Obermann

Part of the above mentioned cycle, *Vallée d'Obermann* (1835-36/1855) is an autobiographical work. It will later be arranged for a piano trio under the name of *Tristia, La vallée d'Obermann*, a somber version whose title refers equally to Senancour's novel and Ovid's *Tristia*. It is introduced by two quotations, noted in the score (Motta 1916:30):

Could I embody and unbosom now
That which is most within me, – could I wreak
My thoughts upon expression, and thus throw
Soul, heart, mind, passions, feelings, strong or weak,
All that I would have sought, and all I seek,
Bear, know, feel, and yet breathe – into one word,
And that one word were Lightning, I would speak;
But as it is, I live and die unheard,
With a most voiceless thought, sheathing it as a sword.

Lord Byron, *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*

Que veux-je? Que suis-je? Que demander à la nature ? Toute cause est invisible, toute fin trompeuse ; toute forme change, toute durée s'épuise : Je sens, j'existe pour me consumer en désirs indomptables, pour m'abreuver de la séduction d'un monde fantastique, pour rester atterré de sa voluptueuse erreur.

Indicible sensibilité, charme et tourment de nos vaines années ; vaste conscience d'une nature partout accablante et partout impénétrable, passion universelle, indifférence, sagesse avancée, voluptueux abandon ; tout ce qu'un cœur mortel peut contenir de besoins et d'ennuis profonds, j'ai tout senti, tout éprouvé dans cette nuit mémorable. J'ai fait un pas sinistre vers l'âge s'affaiblissement ; j'ai dévoré dix années de ma vie.

Senancour, *Obermann*, letter 63 et 4

Étienne Pivert de Senancour (1770-1846)

A source of inspiration for Liszt, Senancour was a French essayist, author of the epistolary novel *Obermann* (1804, rev. 1833),³ inspired by Rousseau. *Obermann* is an ailing, melancholic, wertherian character and the novel can be considered autobiographical. It is the meditation of a soul that has fallen victim of boredom ("Senancour" 2002: 1126).

Lord George Gordon Byron (1788-1824)

Role model of revolutionary poets, Byron was a poetic ideal for Pushkin, Hugo, Heine, while "Byronism" became an existential standard embodied by Goethe in *Euphorion*, in the second part of *Faust*. Byron's work has become a remarkable source of inspiration for writers, composers and painters alike. Therefore, the narrative poem *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*, with echoes in Pushkin's novel, *Yevgeny Onegin*, is the inspiration for two works, *Harold in Italy* by Berlioz and *Vallée d'Obermann* by Liszt, while also being immortalized in William Turner's painting, *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage – Italy*.

The dramatic poem *Manfred* becomes a symphonic poem with Schumann and a symphony with Tchaikovsky. The theme in the narrative poem *Mazeppa* is used by Pushkin in the poem *Poltava*, which then became a model for Tchaikovsky's opera *Mazeppa*, for Victor Hugo (a poem from the volume *Les Orientales*, published in 1829), as well as a programmatic source for the Transcendental Étude No. 4 and the Symphonic Poem No. 6 by Liszt. It is

³ The title of the first edition was *Oberman*.

worth mentioning that the echoes of the poem also gave birth to pictorial images such as lithographies (Théodore Gericault, *Chevaux: Mazeppa*, 1823) or famous paintings (Eugène Delacroix, *Mazeppa on the Dying Horse*, and Horace Vernet, *Mazeppa and the Wolves*).

Finally, the historical tragedy *The Two Foscari* is the inspiration for the libretto of the opera *I due Foscari* by Verdi, while being immortalized in painting by Francesco Hayez and Eugène Delacroix (*Les deux Foscari*).

***Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* ([1809] 1812-1818)**

Lyrical-epic poem conceived as a travel journal and structured in four cantos published in various years, *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* brings to the fore plan a young, proud, lonely and disappointed aristocrat who became the archetype of the romantic traveler. In the introduction to Chant 4, Byron identifies with his character:

[I]t was in vain that I asserted, and imagined, that I had drawn a distinction between the author and the pilgrim; and the very anxiety to preserve this difference, and disappointment at finding it unavailing, so far crushed my efforts in the composition, that I determined to abandon it altogether – and have done so. (Byron 2015)

FAILED MARRIAGES, THE INJUSTICE OF SOCIAL CONVENTIONS AND AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL ASPECTS

The poets' short biographies and the succinct presentations of the inspiring works have led us to the following observations:

- i. There are remarkable similitudes between the authors: Pushkin was killed in a duel which he provoked after a less than happy marriage to Natalia Goncharova; Senancour had, in his turn, an unhappy marriage to Marie-Françoise Daguët; Byron had a short marriage to Annabella Milbanke (1815-16) at the time he wrote *Childe Harold*; moreover, writer Marie d'Agoult⁴ and princess Carolyne zu Sayn-Wittgenstein⁵ were both Liszt's partners, but neither of them became his wife.

⁴ Chopin dedicated to her *12 Études*, Op. 25 (published in 1837).

⁵ She also admired and encouraged Berlioz, who dedicated to her *Les Troyens* (grand opera composed in 1856-58).

- ii. The poets' works unravel or incriminate the injustice of social conventions: Pushkin, in *Yevgeny Onegin*, in the duel leading to Lenski's death, and Senancour in his treaty *De l'amour* about marriage and family life. As for Byron, he was uncompliant and rebel in both his actions and his works.
- iii. The novels and poems mentioned above either have autobiographical content or allow for similar interpretations: Lenski's death in the duel is a fatal premonition for Pushkin's destiny, *Obermann* can be read as Senancour's intimate diary during his Swiss years, while Byron builds his *Childe Harold* character as his *alter-ego*.

INFLUENCES AND MODELS: VALLÉE D'OBERMANN AND YEVGENY ONEGIN

The relationship between the poetic and literary sources and the musical works is well known and can be rendered synthetically as follows:

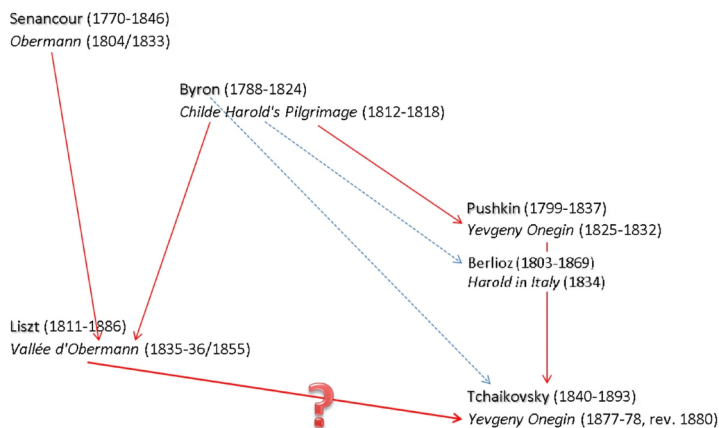


Fig. 1. The connections between the literary sources and the musical works.

Similarly, the relationships between Liszt and Tchaikovsky have been detailed. What is, however, the connection between *Vallée d'Obermann* and *Yevgeny Onegin*? An observation based on the mere acoustic comparison has revealed to us the resemblance between the theme in Liszt's work and Lenski's aria (see Ex. 1 and 2).

Ex. 1. Liszt, *Vallée d'Obermann* (mm. 1-8).

Ex. 2. Tchaikovsky, *Yevgeny Onegin*, *Lenski's aria* ("Where have you gone, o golden days of my spring?"), act II, scene 17 (mm. 58-61).

There are few bibliographic sources explaining the extra significance brought by the prosodic quotation. Less interested in a hermeneutic approach, pianist and composer Leslie Howard writes the following: "If the flattery of imitation were anything to go by, then Tchaikovsky certainly admired *Vallée d'Obermann* sufficiently when he appropriated its main theme for Lenski's aria in *Yevgeny Onegin*" (Howard 1996: 3). More systematic and exciting, musicologist Michele Girardi explains Tchaikovsky's option by referring rather to the two quotations in Liszt's score, from *Obermann* and *Childe Harold*, characters which mark Tchaikovsky's destiny (Girardi 2002). He also makes notice of the similitudes between the programs of *Yevgeny Onegin* and Symphony No. 4, and considers that Tchaikovsky loves Lenski, but identifies himself with Onegin, as well as with all the other characters incapable of living.⁶

The index function of the quotation becomes thus explicit. These interpretations aside, we should broaden our area of research by starting from Tchaikovsky's descending motive which can be found in:

- the third theme in the Letter Scene (see Ex. 3);
- the second theme in the fourth part of Symphony No. 4 (a folk song is quoted following the fate theme; see Ex. 4);
- the end of Symphony No. 6 *Pathétique* (see Ex. 5).

⁶ "[T]utti accomunati dalla stessa incapacità di vivere." (Girardi 2002).



Ex. 3. Tchaikovsky, *Yevgeny Onegin*, Letter Scene – Tatiana (“Who are you? My guardian angel or a cruel tempter?”), act I, scene 2 (mm. 194-200).



Ex. 4. Tchaikovsky, *Symphony No. 4*, part 4 (mm. 60-65).



Ex. 5. Tchaikovsky, *Symphony No. 6*, part 4 (mm. 1-4).

All these stylistic instances gather symbolic meanings, with the *descensio* as a proof of emotions between hope and despair.

In the end, I would like to answer the question posed by the elusive quotation present in Lenski's aria, quoted by Tchaikovsky from Liszt's *Vallée d'Obermann*. The biographic resemblances between the Russian composer and those who inspired Liszt, Senancour and Byron, as well as the essence of their characters, Obermann and Childe Harold, place Tchaikovsky in a game without a solution, as to follow Onegin's path would mean to be immoral and unhappy, while Lenski's way is about the fatality of death.

The quotation can also have a different meaning because: the Russian composer uses the *incipit* of Liszt's theme as he adopts it; it belongs to him stylistically speaking; he wishes to give it that dramatic and melodic evolution refused by Liszt's contemplative piano music. It is therefore a stylistic adaptation proving once more the programmatic essence of Tchaikovsky's work.

English version by Roxana Huza

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