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Jess Tyre

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**CONVERSATIONS WITH FRANCESCA:
TCHAIKOVSKY, LISZT, AND WAGNER
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GO TO HELL**

JESS TYRE, SUNY Potsdam

Tchaikovsky completed his tone poem *Francesca da Rimini* in 1876, during the period he was attending the premiere of Wagner's *Ring* Cycle at Bayreuth. Critics of the work drew comparisons with the Tetralogy and faulted what seemed to be Tchaikovsky's derivative inspiration. Indeed, the composer himself acknowledged Wagner's influence. In this paper, I set aside influence to consider intertextual dialogues between Tchaikovsky's work and others by Liszt, Zandonai, Rachmaninov, and not Wagner's *Ring*, but *Tristan und Isolde*. Drawing upon theories by Klein and Peirce, I examine parallelisms of topic, melodic contour, tonal motion, and timbral signifiers to establish a "conversation" between Francesca's tale and King Marke's speech at the conclusion of Act 2 of *Tristan*. The results reveal an interactive field of narration and symbolization that projects both stories' themes of desire, betrayal, guilt, and love.

Keywords: Dante, Tchaikovsky, Wagner, Intertextuality, Francesca da Rimini

The sounds that open Tchaikovsky's tone poem *Francesca da Rimini*—strains of diminished sonorities, woeful, crying woodwinds, chromatic strings, screaming in agony—echo those heard in Liszt's *Dante* symphony and sonata. They reverberate through Rachmaninov's opera on the same subject and Granados's tone poem *Dante*. Here is a subject signifying terror, sorrow, and despair. Topical relationships found in nineteenth-century musical interpretations of the *Inferno* intersect, not only with each other, but with musical settings of *Faust*, *Romeo and Juliet*, *Manfred*, *Hamlet*, and perhaps most notably, with Wagner's *Tristan und Isolde*, wherein one finds an intertext that trails from the medieval tales of Tristram, down to Riccardo Zandonai's 1914 opera about Francesca, and surely beyond. The connection comes as no real surprise; indeed, Dante himself identified a link to Isolde's sad hero when, in Canto

5 of the *Inferno*, he included Semiramis, Dido, Paris, and Tristan among Francesca's companions in Hell.

There are both obvious similarities and subtle differences in the stories of Francesca and Tristan: a noble woman, forced into a marriage with somebody she barely knows, falls in love with another man who is close to her betrothed. She pursues her love by defying the rules of society. Consummation and death follow.

Tchaikovsky acknowledged Wagner's and even Gustave Doré's influences upon his symphonic *fantaisie* on the subject of Francesca.¹ Beyond the question of sources, however, I want to consider intertextual references in the work; in particular, an exchange between the central section depicting Francesca's narrative and King Marke's speech at the end of Act 2 in *Tristan und Isolde*. While I focus on Tchaikovsky and Wagner, I will also briefly touch on connections to other pieces inspired by the *Inferno*, works by the aforementioned composers that I see forming topics related to both Francesca and Tristan.

With roots in literary criticism, intertextual theory has become a fundamental tool in musicology today. Julia Kristeva articulated its basic tenet in claiming that all works, all texts, constitute a space where "several utterances, taken from other texts, intersect and neutralize one another."² Roland Barthes similarly described the "cultural space" of the "already written or read," which he called the *déjà* that informs all texts. "Without the—always anterior—Book and Code," claimed Barthes, "no desire, no jealousy." The comment recalls Canto 5 of the *Inferno*, and indeed Barthes was thinking of it when he added: "Paolo and Francesca love each other *according* to the passion of Lancelot and Guinevere."³

More direct inspiration for this paper comes from theories of topic and intertextuality put forth by Robert Hatten, Leonard Ratner, Byron Almén, Raymond Monelle, and especially Michael Klein, who has challenged Kristeva's and Barthes's privileging of

¹ Letter to Sergei Taneyev, 8 April 1878, in David Brown, *Tchaikovsky: a biographical and critical study*, 4 vols. (New York: W.W. Norton, 1983), 2: 108; Modeste Tchaikovsky, *Life and Letters of Peter Ilich Tchaikovsky*, trans. Rosa Newmarch (New York: Dodd Mead, 1905), 188.

² Julia Kristeva, "The Bounded Text," in *Desire in Language: A Semiotic Approach to Literature and Art*, trans. Thomas Gora, Alice Jardine, and Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1969), 36.

³ Roland Barthes, *S/Z*, trans. Richard Miller (New York: Hill and Wang, 1970), 73–74.

anteriority.⁴ Arguing for “reverse” historical analysis in considering intertextual relationships, Klein has moved beyond the task of recreating the contexts for establishing influences among works, something he finds almost impossible to realize, because, as he observes, “each of the texts involved is already tainted by our readings of other texts.”⁵ In many cases, newer contexts are imposing upon older ones, a point which applies to the arguments made in this paper. With the exception of those by Liszt and Wagner, the titles under consideration here were composed after Tchaikovsky’s death; moreover, Tchaikovsky claimed to have heard *Tristan und Isolde* for the first time only in 1883, seven years after writing *Francesca*.⁶ It is not a question of influences, therefore, but, as Klein asserts, of “transhistoric” texts that are “interlinked in multiple directions . . . crossing texts that may involve historical reversal.”⁷ If we must insist on influence, we would have to maintain that perhaps Tchaikovsky absorbed elements from *Tristan* that had migrated into another work by Wagner, namely the *Ring Cycle*, the premiere of which Tchaikovsky attended in 1876.⁸

The sign of the narrative agent is a chief indicator in intertextual analysis. In Romantic music, this agent often manifests as a solo, monophonic utterance, a single thread that ties together extended sections of a work. In Tchaikovsky’s *Francesca*, a solo clarinet links the opening music—the whirlwind that tosses the condemned souls in the second circle of Hell—to the tone poem’s central section, the “Francesca” theme, which, as we know from Tchaikovsky’s program, depicts the point in the *Inferno* when the doomed woman tells her story to Dante and Virgil. The bass clarinet performs the same connective function in Liszt’s *Dante*

⁴ Michael L. Klein, *Intertextuality in Western Art Music* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2005); Robert Hatten, “The Place of Intertextuality in Music Studies,” *American Journal of Semiotics* 3, no. 4 (1985): 69–82; *Interpreting Musical Gestures, Topics, and Tropes: Mozart, Beethoven, Schubert* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2004); Leonard G. Ratner, *Classic Music: Expression, Form, and Style* (New York: Schirmer Books, 1980); Byron Almén, *A Theory of Musical Narrative* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2008); Raymond Monelle, *The Sense of Music: Semiotic Essays* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000).

⁵ Klein, *Intertextuality*, 4.

⁶ Letter to N. von Meck, 31 December (12 January) 1883/1884, in *Life and Letters*, 431–432.

⁷ Klein, *Intertextuality*, 4.

⁸ Catherine Coppola argues for the influence of Wagner’s *Die Walküre* in Tchaikovsky’s *Francesca* in “The Elusive Fantasy: Genre, Form, and Program in Tchaikovsky’s *Francesca da Rimini*,” *19th-Century Music* 22, no. 2 (1998): 169–189.

Symphony. In Rachmaninov's *Francesca*, the bass clarinet introduces Lancelotto's aria, in which the suspicious Malatesta grieves over the possibility of his wife's infidelity. And parallel to the Rachmaninov, King Marke's complaint about Tristan's betrayal is launched by a bass clarinet solo. (Example 1 shows the four linking motives.)

Example 1: Four linking motives

Tchaikovsky, *Francesca da Rimini* (clarinet, mm 213-220)



Liszt, *Eine Symphonie zu Dantes Divina Commedia* (bass clarinet in treble clef, mm 286-293)



Rachmaninov, *Francesca da Rimini* (bass clarinet, link to Act I, Scene II)



Wagner, *Tristan und Isolde*, Act II, Scene III (bass clarinet in bass clef)



Following these transitional passages, both Tchaikovsky and Liszt use clarinets to color their “Francesca” themes. A similar gesture from Wagner accompanies not Isolde, Francesca’s apparent counterpart, but the heartbroken King Marke, the parallel to Gianciotto/Lanceotto. In the Tchaikovsky and the Liszt, the Francesca theme follows immediately. In the Wagner, Marke first sings a recitative-like section, and then something more like an aria, almost always in the company of bass clarinet. Lanceotto, too,

ruminates over his feelings towards Francesca to the sounds of the bass clarinet in Rachmaninov's opera. The same distinctive tone-color sign—the dark, lonely clarinet or bass clarinet—is established for the same purpose: to relate a tale of desire, loss, and regret.

Marke's perspective is that of Gianciotto (Lanceotto), not of Francesca, and this produces a fascinating tension between musical relationships and contextual meaning. Two respective motives, which I call "Francesca's sorrow" in the Tchaikovsky and "Marke's complaint" in the Wagner, manifest affiliation but also individuality (See Example 2). Francesca's theme is characterized by an *appoggiatura* (incomplete neighbor) figure, Marke's by a *cambiata* or neighbor group. Marke's theme most resembles Francesca's in its initial form (it varies in each of its presentations). Evident in both is a similarity of rhythm, tempo, and breadth of phrase, as well as of contour (though not pitch), and dominant-tonic motion (weakly maintained in the Wagner from B-flat to e-flat minor), all of which helps characterize Marke's and Francesca's unfolding sorrowful narratives, and casts in relief their differing perspectives.

Example 2

"Francesca's Sorrow" (Tchaikovsky, mm 221-222)



"Marke's Complaint" (Wagner, *Tristan und Isolde*, Act II, Scene III, top line, bass clef)



In its totality, Francesca's theme has more conventional integrity. Marke's motive, as it unfolds, seems incomplete, and

searching. Both themes are obsessive and persistent in their varied repetitions, Marke's continually repeating and adapting the motive's rhythm. Formally, we find Tchaikovsky stating his theme four times, varying parts of the melody, enriching the harmony, and creating extensions that lead to a dramatic, final statement by the full force of the orchestra. Perhaps this is the musical correlative to Francesca's three statements concerning the power and punishment of "Amor." Love had incited Paolo's desire, likewise had seized Francesca and led to death, and now, through everlasting torment, it punished in the worst way as a constant reminder of the couple's fleeting but great happiness.⁹

Marke's speech, too, is structured in four parts. Notably in the second section, the king sings of his love for Tristan, and of his nephew's efforts to find him a bride in spite of his inclinations. This part parallels Paolo's assignment: to procure Francesca as his brother's bride. At the climax of the speech, Marke wails (to the accompaniment of the clarinet) that now all is lost because of Tristan's disloyalty. He implores Tristan to explain his actions, and despairingly asks why he must endure a "hell with no hope of heaven." Eric Chafe identifies this entreaty as the chief existential question: "Why does one suffer to no purpose?" Francesca and Paolo face the same predicament and question.¹⁰

Neither Tristan nor Isolde responds adequately to Marke. Yet perhaps Francesca's theme and her fate do, or at least they offer another perspective through the partial inversion of the king's motive. The harmony immediately preceding Tchaikovsky's linking theme from Example 1 also provides a hint that Francesca will answer Marke in her music. Here, the composer emphasizes a half-diminished seventh chord that resolves to the dominant, stressing the sound, if not the spelling or context, of the "Tristan" chord. This gateway, as it were, between the storm-tossed opening of the work and Francesca's theme can be seen symbolically as an entryway, an opening onto an intertextual landscape, or as the revolving door by which we read both Francesca and Marke in Tchaikovsky's tone poem.

Adapting Klein's position of "historical reversal," we may likewise see Marke's speech as a reply to Tchaikovsky's Francesca

⁹ *Inf.* 5.99–105, 118–119.

¹⁰ Eric Chafe, *Tragic and Ecstatic: The Musical Revolution of Wagner's Tristan und Isolde* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 225.

in that it sheds light on Gianciotto's predicament, notwithstanding Malatesta's deceit. In fact, Gianciotto finds his voice in Marke. Thus the similarity in rhythm and contour with Francesca's theme represents a conjoining of the unfortunate woman with her husband and his parallel in Wagner's opera. Marke asks questions that Francesca answers in Dante's text: namely, that love is to blame for the fate of all concerned. In Rachmaninov's setting, Lanceotto's aria closes the circle of association as it projects Marke's outlook onto Francesca's narrative. For the two men want the same thing, but from different counterparts in the two stories: Lanceotto is torn because Francesca does not love him, whereas Marke is despondent because Tristan has shown that he no longer loves him.

Example 3

"Glückseligkeit" motive from *Tristan und Isolde*



Rachmaninov, *Francesca da Rimini*, Act II



Tchaikovsky, *Francesca da Rimini*, mm 346-348



A second topic emerges in the climaxes of the respective themes: "Consummation"—yet now the Wagner-reference changes. Here, melodic descent signifies collapse and capitulation to desire. The model type is now the *Glückseligkeit* or "bliss" leitmotif first heard

at the climax of Act 2 in *Tristan*. This is a type of surging wave sequence, and the theme for the love duet in Rachmaninov’s opera appears to be a relative. Both motives are heard only in the orchestra. Tchaikovsky’s Francesca theme has its parallel in a descending scale (in triplet quarter notes) that falls to the tonic key of E by passing through an augmented sixth chord. This chord or its sonic equivalent of C major also creates a stunning effect at the end of the work, extending the final tense moments before an ultimate resolution to the lone pitch, E. Example 3 shows the “Glückseligkeit” motive and its cousins. Note the rhythmic similarity, in some cases, to the linking passages cited in Example 1.

Zandonai’s theme for Francesca and Paolo, also resonant with the “bliss” motive, first appears in Act 1 in D major (Example 4). It subsequently returns in Act 3 when the lovers are united, and at the very end of the opera. Its descent to the tonic (after a brief reference to E major) occurs by way of a Neapolitan chord on E-flat. In both the Tchaikovsky and the Zandonai, altered harmonies operate as temporary landing points on the way to resolutions that occur quickly and provide relief from the provisional quality of the two chords. In this context, the Neapolitan and the augmented sixth convey a sense of expansion, of widening the emotional landscape, or of deepening the import of the topic, which is the consummation of love and the realization of destiny. The historical symbolism of chords is potent here. The augmented sixth chord has been associated with the idea of revenge since the Baroque era.¹¹ Extrapolating from both chords an effect of exquisitely painful, fatal resignation—a sign for destiny and what that means in this case—we might anticipate Gianciotto’s vengeful impulse even as Francesca and Paolo fall for each other and engage in their climactic embrace.

Example 4

Zandonai, *Francesca da Rimini*, Act I.



¹¹ Mark Ellis, *A Chord in Time: The Evolution of the Augmented Sixth from Monteverdi to Mahler* (Surrey: Ashgate, 2010).

Tonal parallelisms reveal another level of shared signification. The four main keys in these works are E major, E minor, A minor, and D minor. D minor is the most important tonal region, though not in Tchaikovsky's *Francesca*. It is of major significance in the Rachmaninov and in the first movement of the Liszt, both of which come crashing down at the end in D minor. The Wagner typically modulates through a number of keys, but, like Granados's *Dante*, starts and ends on D minor, with some extended emphasis upon parallel and relative pitch centers. The Zandonai love theme for Francesca and Paolo starts in D major in Act 1—a reversed illusion, as it were—and is heard briefly in E at the end of Act 4; yet, after an extended traversal through tri-tones within the context of C major (when Gianciotto chases down and kills the couple), the opera finishes with a terrific barrage of D minor. The Tchaikovsky, however, revolves around E major for the central “Francesca” theme and focuses on E minor and A minor elsewhere.

Eighteenth- and early-nineteenth-century aestheticians identified these four keys with sensuality, a subject central to the Francesca/Tristan stories, as well as with stereotypes of female sensibilities. For example, Christian Schubart's treatise on musical aesthetics, *Ideen zu einer Aesthetik der Tonkunst* (1806), described E major, a key highlighted at the consummation of love in both the Tchaikovsky and the Zandonai, as “full delight.” He defined E minor as the key of “innocent, womanly declarations of love, which resolves in the pure happiness of C major”—the chord to which Tchaikovsky's “Francesca” theme descends and also a culminating point in the Zandonai. Schubart dubbed A minor, the key used initially in Tchaikovsky's “Francesca” theme, “pious womanliness and tenderness of character,” and D minor, the central tonal region in every piece but Tchaikovsky's, “melancholy womanliness.” Yet another path of interpretation broadens out here, and no doubt other connections could be drawn from both later and earlier works on musical aesthetics.¹²

From analysis of the intertextual dialogues in these works, one may conclude that Francesca, Tristan, and Liszt's *Dante* share a common system of expression, a language of rhythmic syntax and

¹² Christian Schubart, *Ideen zu einer Aesthetik der Tonkunst*, trans. Rita Steblin, in *A History of Key Characteristics in the 18th and Early 19th Centuries* (Rochester: University of Rochester Press, 1983), 121–124.

tone color, wherein gesture and timbre speak as symbols of sensuality, emotional attachment, allure, and anguished searching. Elements in each work also satisfy narrative impulses mobilized and intensified through harmonic movement, which itself acts to symbolize relationships made and broken, thought, actions, and the fulfillment of destiny.

Barthes maintained that tracing connections is the chief aim of intertextual analysis, which seeks meanings that direct us to yet other interpretations. One may argue that, in the end, the music must speak for itself, but it passes through a multitude of historical, cultural, stylistic, and personal filters, picking up significations that the listener incorporates with experiences of other works from across the time spectrum. The results produce yet other signifiers, so that the music never finally finishes saying whatever it is trying to say. As Barthes noted, meaning is forever postponed, or at best, temporary.¹³ Following the traces leads not to absolute meaning, but to reflection, and a strong engagement that surely supports the aims of any musical art.

We seek meaning in the intersections between texts. Some of these synapses, such as those found in relationships among chord progressions, melodic contours, or rhythms, etc., may be obvious, especially when they occur in works of similar subject matter. Locating more obscure associations requires a leap of interpretation that has its origin in aural memory and the experience of hearing and studying works repeatedly, a process that Charles Peirce called “abduction.”¹⁴ That leap can point to new levels of meaning.

There are always more links to establish and more paths to follow. Other topics in the works discussed here await further exploration as well: the opening allegro whirlwind in the Tchaikovsky, with its tritones and half-diminished sonorities, which I see as an Infernal Dance, or *Danse macabre*; a melody in Granados’s *Dante* recalling the first movement of Tchaikovsky’s Sixth Symphony that takes us beyond Francesca and Tristan; and Granados’s opening measures, which evoke the atmosphere of Debussy’s *Pelléas et Mélisande*. Of course, Tristan, Isolde, and *Tristan und Isolde* are also topics in themselves and are especially relevant to

¹³ Roland Barthes, *The Pleasure of the Text*, trans. Richard Miller (New York: Hill and Wang, 1975), 6.

¹⁴ Charles Peirce, *Philosophical Writings of Peirce*, ed. Justus Buchler (New York: Dover, 2011), 304.

Zandonai's *Francesca* because of Gabriele D'Annunzio's direct references to Wagner in his libretto. Development of these topics will further pursue intertexts in musical settings of Dante's most powerful statement concerning the excesses of lust and those "who subject reason to desire."¹⁵

¹⁵ *Inf.* 5.39: ". . . che la ragion sommettono al talento."