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Works by F.M. Dostoyevsky on Drama and Music Stage

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This article is devoted to the works by F.M. Dostoyevsky which found original embodiment in Russian music and theatre of Russia in the last third of the XX – early XXI centuries. The research marks historical stages of formation and development of Russian theatre life, reveals the character of each stage in connection with the main tendencies of time. Due to the historical approach it becomes possible to notice the peculiarities of opera genre, the reasons for emergence of certain genres. Moreover, the research presents the difference in interpreting plots by Dostoyevsky in drama and music theatres. It is an attempt to justify the reasons of actual continuity and relevance of the writer's prose on opera and drama stages in one of the hardest periods in the history of Russia and nowadays. In order to expand the field of research, it also covers a series of opera pieces by modern authors which have not been exposed to research yet.

Keywords: Dostoyevsky, opera, drama theatre, prose, music.

In the history of world culture there are some names and phenomena which do not lose their essentiality with every decade, but, on the opposite, gain more importance, significance and meaning, becoming a certain spiritual milestone for the next generations. Among such, there are works by great Russian writer Fyodor Mikhailovich Dostoyevsky, the name, which, together with A.S. Pushkin, P.I. Tchaikovsky, S.V. Rakhmaninov has become one of the symbols of Russia. In Russian literature it is hard to find an author who would attract so much interest of researchers. However, it does not decrease the interest for the prose by the author of “The Demons”, inspiring researchers to turn to the books by F.M. Dostoyevsky over and over again,



each time discovering something new, not found by anyone else.

The sincerity of Dostoyevsky, philosophical and ethical profoundness of his works, aspiration

for observing human in all the diversity caused the interest of the XX century art for the prose by the “great griever for the Russian nation”. The special corresponding bond between the modern time and the artistic world of the writer gets stronger and stronger. In our opinion, it happens because the works of the great Russian humanist, as if they were a specific model of the world, embody the spiritual strivings of the epoch, moral searches of the contemporaries. Moreover, the problems outlined by F.M. Dostoyevsky in his novels and essays become more and more topical with time. It is witnessed not only by multiple studies of philosophers, theologians and theorists of literature, but also by regular theatre performances, film versions of the writer’s novels, and the experience of turning to his plots accumulated by Russian opera theatre during the XX – early XXI centuries. The present article is dedicated to an attempt of spotlighting some aspects of interaction between the literary world of F.M. Dostoyevsky and modern theatre practice.

The name of F.M. Dostoyevsky entered the world of music dramaturgy in the beginning of the XX century due to the opera by S.S. Prokofiev. Written in 1916, “The Gambler” anticipated the search of the new generation musicians “for theatricalization of opera and renewal of its intonation pattern” (Baeva, 1996: 14). In many ways it was stimulated by the language of the writer’s prose, the specific expressive intensiveness of the way his characters speak, which was brilliantly interpreted in music. However, the discovery of Prokofiev was not continued in the works of his contemporaries. Those were foreign composers who expressed much more interest for the classic of Russian literature. They interpreted such pieces as “Crime and Punishment” (A. Pedrollo, same-name opera, 1926; “Raskolnikov” by H. Sutermeister, 1947), “The Brothers Karamazov” (musical drama by O. Jeremiáš, 1927; dramatic

oratorio “The Grand Inquisitor” by B. Blacker, 1942; “The Karamazovs” by P. Kenen, 1945), “The House of the Dead” (1928, L. Janáček “From the House of the Dead”), “Uncle’s Dream” (“Engagement in a Dream” by H. Krása, 1933) and others.

It would be relevant to mention that in the beginning of the XX century in Germany, and then in France, there appears and rapidly develops one of the largest philosophical branches, known as existentialism. The problems studied by the representatives of this branch were concentrated around questions about human: trueness of his earthly life; suffering on being “abandoned” in the world, desire to identify himself; realization of freedom and responsibility, and, consequently, setting the question about God and what freedom actually is. The origins of this study were initiated and literally imported to the West by two Russian philosophers, L. Shestov and N.A. Berdyaev who were among the first researchers of F.M. Dostoyevsky. Following the Russian thinkers, existentialists from France and Germany also turned to the works by this great Russian writer, trying to discover and reveal the human personality, the problem of its being “enrooted” in the world. For religious existentialists it was also significant that Dostoyevsky “was the first to show and reveal the common European evil which turned to be unconquered during the centuries of Christian development. He wanted to cure evil with Christianity, believing that its influence has not yet pierced the mass of society” (Kantor, 2000: 32).

Complexity of moral and ethical problems specific for the prose of this Russian novelist and so close to the searches of West European culture, turned out to be absolutely strange to the new audience which came to the theatre in the first post-revolutionary decades of the past century and clearly formulated its social order. The studies of F.M. Dostoyevsky heritage were unnecessary

during the Stalin era, when the author of immortal literature pieces was tagged as “socially harmful”, “a political retrograde and traitor of the revolution”. As G.M. Fridlender writes, “there was no other Russian classic who was put into a more tragic situation by Stalin regime” (Dostoyevsky, 1978: 5). The works of the author were gradually withdrawn from the school program together with those by M.M. Bulgakov and A.P. Platonov, O.E. Mandelstam and A.A. Akhmatova, S.A. Esenin and M.M. Zoshchenko.

This attitude reflected the common art situation of those times. Ideological pressure of the party, discussions of advantages and disadvantages of opera performances at the gatherings of the Central Committee followed by corresponding decrees published by “Pravda” newspaper brought Soviet opera to quite understandable stereotypes. The plots of so-called “big literature” (except for operas by S.S. Prokofiev, D.D. Shostakovich and B.V. Asafyev) disappeared from opera practice. New opera characters were devoted to one and the same (usually, revolutionary or nationally patriotic) idea, were deprived of inner contradictions or psychological ambiguity. Is it still surprising that under such conditions books by F.M. Dostoyevsky were not demanded? The main characters of “Crime and Punishment”, “The Demons”, “The Brothers Karamazov”, “The Adolescent” and other novels are personalities torn between God and devil, good and evil, limitless freedom and patience absolutely could not fit in the framework of communistic understanding what a true revolutionary character is like.

Accumulation of plot, drama, image and intonation stereotypes resulted in a crisis of Russian opera theatre in mid-1950s. Such situation remained until the second half of 1960s which became a milestone in the history of genre development. Expansion of searches and experiments, aspiration to break the rules of settled patterns, development

of various opportunities of the genre were a reflection of the creative atmosphere which reigned in the country during the Khrushchev Thaw. The changes which occurred in the opera theatre of the 60s, were, first of all, visible in the “big” opera genre. “Virinea” by S.M. Slonimsky, “The Defeat of the Squadron” by V.S. Gubarenko, “Intervention” by V.A. Uspensky introduced Soviet audience to the character capable of overcoming moral difficulties, trapped in the process of personal self-identification, sometimes even torn away from the “revolutionarily thinking masses”.

Since that time the spheres of theatre, cinematograph, journalism continued vibrating with the interest to the most significant pieces of Western and Russian literature, reflecting the eternal problems of human being. Works by A.A. Blok and V.Ya. Bryusov, A.A. Akhmatova and M.A. Bulgakov were re-read and re-interpreted, “Hamlet” by G.M. Kozintsev came out on screen. Russian theater pays more attention to the problem of moral searches, personal life and family relations. In their performances A.V. Efros, G.B. Volchek, M.A. Zakharov, L.E. Kheifets turn to classics looking for the roots of the present, seeing it as a spiritual ally. Theatre interpretations of M.M. Bulgakov, M.Yu. Lermontov, A.S. Griboyedov, A.N. Ostrovsky, A.P. Chekhov and, of course, F.M. Dostoyevsky appear one after another.

As theatre critics of 60-70s notice, the name of the creator of “The Brothers Karamazov” appears on the theatre posters after a long period of oblivion. “Idiot” at Bolshoi Drama Theatre and Pskov Drama Theatre, “Crime and Punishment” in Krasnoyarsk, “Humiliated and Insulted” in Sverdlovsk, “The Village of Stepanchikovo” at Novosibirsk “Krasny Fake!” Theater mean more than just revival of interest towards the prose by F.M. Dostoyevsky, but also to the topicality it means for new art.

Similar processes are observed at opera theatre. Searches for new forms, expressive means, genre ambiguity replaces the unambiguity of “big” opera. The longing of the authors to reveal the value of each personality, its uniqueness and distinctiveness leads to the great popularity of smaller opera genres in the period. M.S. Weinberg, G.S. Frid, Yu.M. Butsko, G.S. Sedelnikov, A.N. Kholminov, V.A. Kobekin work in the genres of mono opera, duo opera. The authors strive to retain the specificity of the prosaic original, therefore updating opera genre by discovering new opportunities which had not been in demand before. In this wave of searches for a “new character”, desire to *“return those things to the world which had been lost”* (Baeva, 1996: 22) the composers turn to sophisticated, philosophically intense, dynamic and expressive prose by F.M. Dostoyevsky.

In the year 1968 two operas, different in their genre, were created on the works by this Russian classic: “big” four-act opera “Nastasya Filippovna” by V.M. Bogdanov-Berezovsky and chamber opera “White Nights” by Yu.M. Butsko. Since that time every decade was marked with the emergence of new music pieces based on novels by Dostoyevsky. In the 70s there were “concerto opera” “Poor Folk” by G.S. Sedelnikov and one-act opera “Bobok” by V.N. Semyonov; in the 80s, there were “big” opera “The Brothers Karamazov” by A.N. Kholminov, tragicomedy musical “Forgetful Groom” by V.I. Kazenin, “Prince Myshkin” by A.A. Baltin and “Idiot” by M.S. Weinberg, in the 90s there were mystery play “Gospel of Satan” by E.I. Lazarev, “Stepanchikovo Dwellers” by V.A. Kotov, chamber opera “N.F.B.” by V.A. Kobekin; in the new century there was Russian musical “Humiliated and Insulted” by A.V. Zhurbin, opera “Crime and Punishment” by E.N. Artemyev¹, music and drama scenes “The Demons” by Krasnoyarsk composer O.I. Meremkulov and

the latest piece based on a novel by Dostoyevsky written for today, mystery opera “The Brothers Karamazov” by A.P. Smelkov².

Despite the great variety of genre and drama interpretations, all mentioned pieces retain the distinctive intonation of F.M. Dostoyevsky prose. The reason is the unique poetic manner of the author of “Crime and Punishment”; a composer, willing or unwilling, gets under its powerful influence. It is no coincidence that the main conceptual constants of the writer’s artistic world, first discovered and studied by N.A. Berdyaev, V.V. Rozanov, M.M. Bakhtin, N.O. Lossky reveal themselves in the operas.

However, it would be wrong to say that the composers inspired by novels by Dostoyevsky set a target to follow the main features of the writer’s poetic manner³. On the opposite, operas are born on the crossroads of literary and musical rules. On one hand, music pieces reflect the compound processes of development of the genre, for which the last four decades had been the most dynamic and bright. On the other hand, the uniqueness, the “humanological orientation” (term by L.G. Dan’ko) of musical scene opuses is mostly caused by the emotionally saturated, expressive prose of F.M. Dostoyevsky it is based on.

The interest towards the prose by the author of “Idiot” does not decrease year after year; for today, it is quite stable. One glance at repertoires of Moscow theatres is enough to make sure of it. Various versions and interpretations of Dostoyevsky are presented to the audience by Mossovet Theatre (“Foma Opiskin”, “Crime and Punishment”), Mayakovsky Theatre (“The Karamazovs” and “Uncle’s Dream”, first played in the anniversary season of 2012-2013), Modern Moscow Drama Theatre (“Uncle’s Dream”, “Katerina Ivanovna”), “Nikitsky Gate” Theatre (“Crocodile Place”), Moscow Theatre of Drama on Malaya Bronnaya (“The Demons. Scenes from

the life of Stavrogin”), “Glas” Russian Spiritual Theatre (“The Village of Stepanchikovo and...”), Satirikon (“One Night with Dostoyevsky”), The Chekhov Moscow Art Theatre (“Crime and Punishment”, “The Demons”), The Vakhtangov Academic Theatre (“The Demons”).

As we can see, drama theatre forms several tendencies in turning to the prose by this Russian classic. Let us illustrate them with the latest performances. The first tendency is connected with the aspiration to keep the “polyphony” of novels by Dostoyevsky, highlighting the key moments of the plot and concentrating on the main ideas of the novel. An illustrating example is “The Devils” performance at “Sovremennik” theatre by A. Vayda shown in 2004. There is another method which is becoming much more popular: the director concentrates on one storyline, as though showing it “in close up”. It is the method used in two performances based on “The Brothers Karamazov” made by S. Zhenovach with his graduate students: “The Boys” (2005), focused on the storyline of Snegiryov family, and “Brother Ivan Fyodorovich” (Theatre Art Studio, 2011). In the same line we can list “A Small Ridiculous Poem” by K. Ginkas (Moscow Youth

Theatre, 2006), based on the text of the last three chapters of the novel; “A Russian Nobleman: Seminarian and a Citizen of the Civilized World” performance by Yu. Pogrebnychko (“Near Stanislavsky House” Theatre, 2006), concentrated around the investigation of “mysterious suicide” of A. Kirillov, a character of “The Demons”, and performance by S. Golomazov “The Demons. Scenes from the Life of Stavrogin” (Moscow Theatre of Drama on Malaya Bronnaya, 2011).

Moreover, in the last several years some theatre performances, where the texts of Dostoyevsky are combined with plays by other authors, began to appear. For example, “Husband, Wife and Paramour” at Mossovet Theatre (directed by Yu. Eremin, 2002), where “Eternal Husband” by Dostoyevsky is naturally merged with “A Provincial Lady” by I.S. Turgenev. Or “Where is Lazar Resurrection?” (“Near Stanislavsky House” theatre) where episodes of “Crime and Punishment stand beside some fragments of play “Never Part from Your Loved Ones” by A. Volodin.

Let us ask ourselves a question: “What are the reasons of this magical attractiveness of Dostoyevsky for composers and directors?”²⁴ The



most likely answer is the following: as he confessed himself, for the whole of his life Dostoyevsky had been searching for a clue to the mystery called “human”, conveying all his thoughts, reflections, doubts, sufferings, experiments to the reader, dressing them in some literary pieces, remaining maximally open and sincere. His faith in God, in the humankind, in kindness were fairly limitless, which did not prevent him to go to the “very end” in his writer “researches”, revealing pain, suffering, torture and agony of a person who had “torn himself apart” from God, good and beauty. According to researchers, the central maxim of the writer was “the right of a person to deny any value, let it be the truth itself, the good itself, or beauty, or utility, is more significant than the value itself. This saying is abstract, this postulate is nothing but a paradox. But Dostoyevsky provides a certain artistic interpretation of it. Moreover,

obviously, this postulate is a sort of aesthetic principle for him” (Nogovitsin, 2007: 62).

The world of Dostoyevsky is full of contradictions and absence of “ready” solutions; it provokes reflection, discussion, polemics with the surrounding world and with the person himself; it leads to sometimes paradoxical conclusions, provokes diversity of interpretations. Maybe, that is the reason why in our hasty era artists turn to the novels by this writer to find the answers to the eternal questions of being. Coming to the “call” of F.M. Dostoyevsky, each of them acquires their own understanding of the plot, and through the plots of the Russian classic they opens up their own world outlook; they look into the artistic world of novels as if it was the best, the most perfect mirror, in order to find the true value of existence and present this discovery to the audience.

¹ Work on this music piece began in the year 1977 and was finished not so long ago. On October 28, 2007 the opera CD was presented to the audience. For more information see (Medkova, 2008).

² The opera was first played on July 23 and 24 at Mariinsky theatre during XVI International Music Festival “White Night Stars” and brought controversial reviews from critics and audience. Libretto writer Yu. Dmitrin, provides the full collection of reviews on his website (7).

³ In this context it is interesting to mention that G.S. Sedelnikov confessed that he read the research on F.M. Dostoyevsky poetics by M.M. Bakhtin a long time after he had written “Poor Folk”. But at the same time the composer grasped and embodied the main traits of the writer’s manner in his opera, mainly speaking, the idea of “polyphonic novel” first expressed by Bakhtin.

⁴ There is no doubt that one of the most important factors of the permanent interest of theatre directors to the prose of Dostoyevsky is the incredible “scenability” of his novels which had been numerously mentioned by his contemporaries.

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Произведения Ф.М. Достоевского на драматической и музыкальной сцене

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Статья посвящена произведениям Ф.М. Достоевского, нашедшим оригинальное претворение в музыкальном и театральном искусстве России последней трети XX – начала XXI века. В ходе исследования обозначаются исторические этапы становления и развития театральной жизни России, раскрывается специфика каждого из них в связи с основными тенденциями времени. Благодаря историческому подходу удается отметить особенности развития жанра оперы, а также причины возникновения на определенном этапе ее особых жанровых разновидностей. Кроме того, отмечается различие в подходах к трактовке сюжетов Достоевского в драматическом и музыкальном театрах. Делается попытка обосновать причины актуальности и востребованности прозы писателя на оперной и драматической сцене в один из сложнейших периодов истории России и в наши дни. С целью расширения научного поля в обиход вводится ряд оперных произведений современных авторов, ранее не становившихся предметом исследовательского интереса.

Ключевые слова: Достоевский, опера, драматический театр, проза, музыка.
