

Miklós Mezősi

## *Puškin's 'Virtual Scene'*

### Some Aspects of Puškin's Historiography. *Boris Godunov* as the *Trivium* on the Way to the Polyphonic Novel

In this paper I aim at drawing attention to one of the specific characteristics of Puškinian dramaturgy encountered in the poet's 'romantic tragedy', *Boris Godunov*. By doing so, not only shall we be able to come across new points for the interpretation of the play or gain further insight into its genesis but, hopefully, we will also be able to get nearer to answering some of the questions about the after-life of *Boris Godunov*. This is likely to help us localize the Puškinian 'historical drama' in the chronotopics of literary history.

To begin with, let me point out the close and intrinsic ties between Puškin and music. The poet's keen inclination to music is, in my view, well palpable in the greater part of his works.<sup>1</sup> What mainly concerns us here is Puškin the dramatist-novelist's musicality.<sup>2</sup> I hereby attempt to show that the principle of music is constituent in Puškin the **poet**. If we look at the 'Little Tragedies' from Puškin's late period, we find two extrinsic signs that do bespeak of the poet's extraordinary affinity to music. Two of these plays explicitly refer to Mozart: *Mozart and Salieri* and *The Stone Guest*. Puškin has chosen as motto to the latter the words of Leporello's aria from the second act of *Don Giovanni* (in the original Italian: '*O statua gentilissima...*'). This gesture of the poet evidently speaks of his intrinsic knowledge of the Mozart-opera (he must have written the motto from his memory, very probably with the music pulsating in his brain). The same affinity toward music seems to be conveyed by the other play too: Mozart's music must have been strongly present in the authorial background of *Mozart and Salieri*. This is testified by the number of musical references in the play: the blind fiddler playing 'Voi che sapete' from *The Marriage of Figaro* and 'an aria from *Don Juan*', likewise the dialogue between the two title characters about *Requiem*.

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<sup>1</sup> The detailed analysis via philological apparati can here be overlooked, as this question would well deserve a separate monography. On the other hand, thanks be to the documentation that has been preserved in a relatively good condition, we can form a sufficiently authentic image of the vivid musical life in Puškin-contemporary 'Piter' (SanktPetersburg).

In one of my earlier articles<sup>3</sup> I drew attention to the bearing of music – musicalness – on Puškin’s poetics. The treatment of the poetical devices, the way the materials are arranged in *Boris Godunov* apparently shows a close analogy with the structure of musical rhythm, whereby the elements that form the *sujet* recur like musical phrases, motifs and themes, endowing this play with a specific musical touch. The question is, then, how and what way is Puškin’s historical tragedy granted its musical character or, formulating the question in a somewhat more poetical manner, how and what is *Geburt der – ‘historischen’ – Tragödie aus dem Geiste der Musik* to be meant as concerns Puškin’s ‘romantic tragedy’? To answer this question, we need at this point to make a brief excursion to the field of musical aesthetics, or rather ‘philosophy’, to illuminate the true nature of the intrinsic relationship between the drama *Boris Godunov* and music.

Any musical piece, *de natura*, from the very moment of its striking up, steps onto the road that leads to its utter elimination. No wonder – any musical artefact lives only and exclusively in its sounding, i.e. **in time**, which necessarily means that after it has been played through it **ends**: henceforth it ceases to exist. If for a – methodological – moment we set a line Mozart’s opera *Don Giovanni* with Shakespeare’s tragedy *King Richard III* and Dostoevskii’s novel *Crime and Punishment*, we shall find that all these three authors’ ‘final word’ is the same, viz. that Raskolnikov’s theory, as well as Don Giovanni’s philosophy and the macchiavellism as interpreted by King Richard, after having been steadily and uncompromisingly carried by the hero up to a certain (final) point, all stop functioning. Consequently, the steady and coherent execution of the philosophies, or ‘ideologies’, related to these three figures inevitably leads to these figures’ ultimate destruction. This is especially, *de genere atque natura*, true of music. In the case of Mozart’s *dramma giocoso*, the philosophy of the protagonist, which is no more and no less than the ‘Giovanni-music’ (Giovanni’s figure as it gets its shape in the music), ceaselessly and obstinately consumes itself as advancing toward the end. From this perspective it can now well be seen why Søren Kierkegaard<sup>4</sup> has termed *Don Juan* as ‘the most classical of all musical pieces’. It follows from the very nature of music to *inexorably and inevitably make its way toward the destruction of its own self*. As for Don Giovanni’s figure, if Kierkegaard is supposed to

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<sup>2</sup> As far as I know, this side of Puškin’s poetry is mostly *terra incognita*, therefore I rely exclusively on my own research and findings in this aspect.

<sup>3</sup> Mezösi 1994.

<sup>4</sup> Kierkegaard, *The Indirect Erotic Stages*.

be right in that Giovanni is the ‘genius of sensuality’ *and* an individual at the same time, and that he is driven by that huge-bulging passion of conquest in which he knows absolutely no halt, we have but to concede that Giovanni’s passion, unceasingly and lavishly surging – by its *par excellence* musical nature – by necessity must lead toward self-destruction, i.e. toward the destruction of the figure itself. The same seems to apply, *mutatis mutandis*, to Shakespeare’s Richard III whom the Big Mechanism strips, ‘reduces’, from king to man<sup>5</sup> – and in the end destroys. Among all Shakespearian heroes it is probably Macbeth who carries to the utmost the principle of ‘Wille zur Macht’ – logically, neither being himself able to survive in the long run. As is the case with Puškin’s pretender-hero, Griška Otrepiev: ‘the circle has come full’, says Iurii Lotman;<sup>6</sup> reaching the end of *Boris Godunov* the reader finds himself thrown back to the play’s starting-point.<sup>7</sup> The fictitious *adventure*, i.e. the road the hero has covered inside the world of poetical fiction, is a hermeneutical adventure; in other words, it constitutes an adequate modelling of the historical reality of human existence. In a musical piece it is the (main) musical subject that parallels the literary hero whom we follow on his way, in his adventures etc.

The authorial technique which in my book I termed ‘the regressive development of the *sujet*’<sup>8</sup> can only to a marginal extent be found in Mozart’s *Don Giovanni* (although it is this very opera where this kind of technique first appears to be traced<sup>9</sup>). The same poetical device (*‘prijem’*) will, however, act as a constituent poetical principle governing the inner compositional structure of the Puškinian historical drama.

Otrepiev and Godunov, nonetheless Ievgenii Onegin, as prototypes of the adventurers and novel-heroes of later literary history, anticipate a figure that constitutes the *sujet* of the novel;<sup>10</sup> secondly, from the view of *sujet* development (*poiesis*), on the level of the *dramatis personae*, or the figures (*‘obrazy’*), Puškin’s drama is bound to lead to self-

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<sup>5</sup> Kott, 7-70 (‘Kings’)

<sup>6</sup> Лотман: *А. С. Пушкин*.

<sup>7</sup> Cf. Jan Kott’s interpretation of Shakespeare’s chronicle plays: the protagonist goes ‘up and down the Big Staircase of History’.

<sup>8</sup> Mezösi 1999. See pp. 257-270 on ‘regressive development of the *sujet*’. To sum up the gist, in *Khovanshchina* the figural and situational setting tends to withdraw as early as not far from the starting-point, generating dramaturgical vacuum on the musical stage. The development of the *sujet* is nothing else than the process of re-completing this vacuum, simultaneously with the regression of the original figural and situational setting.

<sup>9</sup> See op. cit. pp. 257-61 on regressive development of the musical *sujet* in *Don Giovanni*. See also Fodor 432-6 on this.

<sup>10</sup> Cf. the emblem of picaresque used by Ágnes Pálfi for *Boris Godunov*. Pálfi 1997.

elimination.<sup>11</sup> The roads covered by the two main heroes, Boris and Grigorii, can each be paralleled with a musical theme resp. in a way that these themes never encounter one another inside the poetical and dramaturgical field of the play. In other words, no direct collision can be traced in the play, yet this circumstance is not going to refrain any of the two main characters from constantly referring or alluding to one another in some way throughout the play. Thus the real conflict is not so much *fought* but, primarily on Boris' behalf, it rather seems a struggle which is *let* fought; the *scene* where this 'strange' conflict is 'staged' is *not* dramatic dialogue (typically the only dialogue that conveys dramatic conflict in the play takes place not between the two main heroes). The heroes thus do not contend on the scene, i.e. 'on the spot', as in the drama their courses of action never cross one another's. If, however, we wish to locate the 'spot', i.e. that very plane of the dramaturgical chronotopos where Grigorii Otrepiev challenges Boris Godunov and fights with him, it seems reasonable to introduce a new concept of 'scene', or 'stage'. The locus where the 'strange conflict' is situated I will call the **virtual scene**. This term is designed to denote an imaginary, 'inner stage' where the inner scenic movements are supposed to take place. These movements indirectly cannot be perceived, as the *sujet* line of the heroes do not cross each other. Thus the dynamics of the dramaturgy becomes palpable in a dimension that is entirely different from what we may have been used to in 'classical' drama.

'The circle has come full' – formulates, in a telling consent with Jan Kott,<sup>12</sup> Iurii Lotman his final conclusion of the Puškinian historiography of *samozvanstvo* – and apparently in compliance with V. Belinskii who called *Boris Godunov* a 'dramatic chronicle'.<sup>13</sup> Belinskii's wording seems to gain further bearing from the viewpoint of defining (or 'definibility' of) Puškin's play, as his definition draws our attention to that unique event in literary history which constitutes the dissolution of tragedy as a genre. The *inner dialogic* relationship forming along the duplication, or sundering, of the dramaturgical chronotopos in the opening scene becomes the vessel of the dramatic *sujet*. Instead of viewing the conflict of the heroes that are struggling on the stage with one another; instead of being granted a once-for-all solution of this conflict via the dramatic catharsis hitherto typical of tragedy, in Puškin's 'dramatic chronicle' we encounter something utterly different and unusual. The

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<sup>11</sup> As a matter of fact, on the level of the *sujet*. Hence can we speak of the self-elimination of the genre (in the Puškin *oeuvre* too).

<sup>12</sup> See his treatise on Shakespearian chronicle plays: Kott, 7-70 ('Kings').

<sup>13</sup> В. Белинский 1950.

outside, on-stage collision, in drama 'traditionally' being realized in the dramatic conflict *between* the heroes, in *Boris Godunov* apparently withdraws into the characters' interior (this explains the exceptionally low number of on-stage conflicts in this play). Its peculiar stand in its genre makes *Boris Godunov* a milestone, *trivium*,<sup>14</sup> as this 'romantic tragedy' alone anticipates three different ways of literary development. One is the Chekhovian drama with its inner monologues and dialogues and its inner scenic chronotopos inherited from Puškin; another is the 19<sup>th</sup> century Russian epics (including here Puškin's own prose in his mature and late years, as well as his *Evgenii Onegin*<sup>15</sup>); the third being Musorgsky's «народная музыкальная драма», *Khovanshchina* (the last one seems to adhere most closely, from a formal viewpoint, to the heritage of historical drama).

According to M. Bakhtin, among all literary genres, it is the polyphonic novel alone, created by Fyodor Dostoevsky, which is apparently capable of representing simultaneously more than one 'voices'.<sup>16</sup> In drama prior to Puškin polyphony did not win this importance in governing dramatic composition; with Puškin, however, an inner scenic field is being induced via polyphony as the 'pragmatical stage' either does not exist or its role has been greatly reduced in the dramatic action. As long as the drama itself does not need immanent polyphony to rule its composition, '[drama] by nature cannot be polyphonic; it can have more than one planes but not more than one worlds – it has to stay inside the bonds of one single reading. [...] every drama contains only one full voice, the hero's, whereas polyphony basically demands a multitude of full voices inside one work, as only this ensures complete polyphony.'<sup>17</sup> At the time, however, when the drama finds itself in a crisis of sorts,<sup>18</sup> the writer is put under heavy pressure to meet the challenge. With the dissolution of the old genre a new one is being born: classical drama from Shakespeare thus points to Dostoevsky's novels, Musorgsky's historical operas and, thirdly, to the dramas of Chekhov. Historical drama is getting dissolved and gives its way to the novel, simultaneously interweaving drama with features hitherto typical of the novel: in Puškin the picaresque, in Chekhov the

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<sup>14</sup> Trivium: *a place where three roads meet, a fork in the roads, cross-road*; 'trivia' is the epitheton of Hecate and other goddesses who had temples at cross-roads. I have chosen *trivium*, this seldom used English word, to indicate the special role of a landmark Puškin's *Boris Godunov* appears to play in the history of literature.

<sup>15</sup> S. Dalton-Brown in her monography (Dalton-Brown 1997) traces the two aspects of M. Bakhtin's theoretical thinking, the polyphonic novel and carnival theory, back to *Evgenii Onegin*. Dalton-Brown definitely links carnival theory with polyphony in the novel, deducing both concepts to Pushkin's 'novel in verse'.

<sup>16</sup> See Bakhtin 1972.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid. Translation is mine – M.M.

<sup>18</sup> *Crisis* of poetical nature (from the Greek word *krino*), compelling the poet to reach the 'critical' point.

veil of ‘novelistic’, and, third, the epical characteristics of the music of Musorgsky’s operas, esp. *Khovanshchina*. This is the way of literary development from the classical tragedy (Shakespeare) through the young Puškin’s ‘romantic tragedy’<sup>19</sup> to Dostoevsky’s novels, then over to the 20<sup>th</sup> century: Michail Bulgakov’s polychronotopical novel, *Master and Margarita*, Alexandr Solzhenytsin’s lager chronicle, the non-fictitious, yet poetical, epic.

Those features of Puškin’s *Boris Godunov* which confer this play the predecessor, or archetype, of the Russian novel seem not seldom to puzzle its contemporary critics, among them e.g. V. Belinskii who is apparently on the right track in his essay on *Boris*,<sup>20</sup> despite all his efforts to run off this track. Similar misunderstandings and suspicions have been abounding around Musorgsky’s *Boris Godunov* as well, making one curious why these plays, both belonging to the genre of historical drama, constantly attract this kind of pertinent misunderstanding, both contemporary and of posterity. If one takes the pains and reads through the reviews and critiques written on Musorgsky in his time,<sup>21</sup> he or she will definitely be struck by the oddity that the judgements formed by the critics are so seldom in coherence with their own personal (positive or negative) attitude toward the composer. A conspicuous example can be Herman Laroche, a relentless foe of Musorgsky’s, whose review of the 1874 première of *Boris* speaks of his extraordinarily keen understanding of the opera (in his review he literally succumbed to Musorgsky’s music), but this did not refrain him from considering himself an outspoken enemy of Musorgsky’s ‘musical radicalism’. At the same time, Musorgsky’s closest friends, with V. Stasov at the front, often seem to betray about as little understanding of the composer’s music as most of his opponents do. The explanation of the contemporaries’ inability to perceive Musorgsky’s music may be sought in that particular position which the historical drama takes. Russian historical drama may be characterised by its ‘twofold presence’ in the given historical chronotopos. The play’s status of *in-der-Welt-sein*, ‘existing-in-the-world’, apparently makes it utterly difficult for the critic to face the given historical chronotopos manifoldly embedded in the present (*Dasein*). Imagine an everyday story, with acting people in it; how

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<sup>19</sup> Puškin’s own definition of his dramatic play is fully compliant with Belinskii’s ‘dramatic chronicle’, as both refer to the epic, or ‘novelistic’, character of *Boris Godunov* (‘romantic tr.’ conveys reference to *роман*, the Russian word denoting ‘novel’, originating from French ‘roman’).

<sup>20</sup> 1950

<sup>21</sup> A good survey of critiques and other documents related to Musorgsky can be found in A. Орлова 1963. There is also an English version of this book (Orlova 1983). Curiously, the most complete edition of all documents related to Musorgsky came out not in the composer’s homeland but in Hungary (Bojti—Papp, eds.).

precise and exact image can these participants be expected to produce of the story they are themselves embedded in? Now comes a poet and modelizes the story: a poem is composed. To what extent will the participants in the original story be capable of producing a reliable and unbiased assess of the poetical work composed after the story? The situation with the two *Boris Godunovs* is all the more complicated inasmuch as the codes used by the drama and the opera are in no way correlation with the ‘story’, the contemporary setting. It is now easy to realize why in the process of apprehending and perceiving existence, *Sein*, it is the poet-demiurgos who takes precedence of everyone else – except the (‘ideal’) recipient supposed along the receptive horizon (or, in other words, his – ‘ideal’ – public). For it is the two counterparts’, the poet’s and his receptive audience’s, mutual co-operation whose result constitutes the poetical work. Our historical drama thus brings forth, via its bare existence, many different standings on many different planes, as if it were an orchestra whose instruments were playing different voices yet the final result that can be heard from the orchestral pit is a constituent piece of music. This kind of polyphony of historical drama is to be understood not in the trivial sense, i.e. in connexion with *dramatis personae*; the term ‘more than one voices’ does not simply refer to ‘more than one characters’ in the play as this would be no more than mere tautology. We should rather speak of *inner polyphony*, which does not necessarily involve more than one voice in the physical sense of the word.

Puškin’s *Boris Godunov* constitutes a historical drama due to its inner rather than its outer features; from this aspect, this ‘romantic tragedy’ is much closer to the Mozart opera, esp. *Don Giovanni* or even *The Marriage of Figaro*, than to, say, Ostrovsky’s dramatic trilogy elaborating the same topic but bearing only formal, outer, signs of the historical drama. ‘History’ is modelized by this inner principle of drama rather than a mere ‘dramatization’ of historical events. As the opera *Don Giovanni* is made what it really is: rather than by merely ‘putting to music’ da Ponte’s libretto, the composer has produced a particular sort of inner rhythmical structure by masterfully handling the dramatic tension, aptly lessening and enhancing the musical strain.

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