

The tragic female character in Janáček's and Shostakovich's work. A conceptual parallel

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Abstract: One of the elements that connects Leoš Janáček and Dmitri Shostakovich works is "Katarina", the name of the two main female characters in their respective operatic works. Both heroines have as models literary works by two great Russian writers, i.e. Alexandr Ostrovsky and Nikolai Leskov, and share a tragic destiny, retained in music, yet reshaped and amplified by the creative vision of the two composers. Before and beyond music, this vision starts from their own re-creation of the libretto, which is deeply personal and different in the case of the Czech and the Russian composer. The present study aims at drawing a parallel between the two characters, two deeply unhappy women, united in their destiny of passionate love and violent death, through voluntary drowning. The concrete goal is to offer Romanian music lovers and musicians a deeper knowledge of the works "Kát'a Kabanová" by Leoš Janáček and "Lady Macbeth of the Mtsensk District" by Dmitri Shostakovich.

Key-words: Katerina; opera; soprano; love; adultery; death

1. Introduction

For both Romanian music lovers and musicians, the operatic works of Leoš Janáček and Dmitri Shostakovich are still very little known, although abroad they appear in numerous directorial-stage and interpretative variants of the highest level. The fact that Janáček and Shostakovich were fascinated by two female characters named *Katerina*, whom they portrayed in musical form, is even less known in Romania. Whether we are talking about novels, short stories or plays, in the Russian literature of the 19th century female characters are often tragic, they have a tense life and many of them end in suicide.

In 1859 playwright Alexandr Ostrovsky (1823-1886), who was famous for his comedies², wrote the drama *The Storm*, whose main female character is *Katerina Kabanova*. An unhappy wife, the victim of a tyrannical mother-in-law, she commits suicide by throwing herself into the Volga, racked with the guilt of having loved another man. Somewhat eclipsed by the personality of his great contemporaries, Lev Tolstoy and Ivan Turgenev, the Russian writer Nikolai Leskov³ (1831-1895) published in 1865 the novella *Lady Macbeth in the Mtsensk District*, whose main female character is called *Katerina Izmailova*. *Katerina*, the much younger wife of a merchant, was terrorized by an oppressive father-in-law and turned adulterous, then criminal; she brought about her own end by throwing herself into the waters of the Volga river – a gesture of extreme revolt against her own life.

What do these two characters have in common? An unhappy married life, the fact that they are oppressed by their mother-in-law and father-in-law respectively, their love of another man, and subsequent suicide by drowning in the Volga river. The latter aspect can turn them into true rusalks, aquatic spirits present in the folklore of Slavic peoples.⁴

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² See https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Alexander_Ostrovsky, accessed 4th March 2021.

³ See https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nikolai_Leskov, accessed 4th March 2021.

⁴ See <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rusalka>, accessed on 4th March 2021.

What distinguishes them? Gentle, loving towards her husband, respectful towards her mother-in-law, Ostrovsky's *Katerina* is deeply religious; however, she realizes every day that her soul yearns for something indefinite, which takes the form of a love that she cannot contain. Considering herself guilty of the sin of loving another man, she confesses it to her beloved ones and, in a crisis close to religious fanaticism, she plunges into the Volga river. Though deeply tormented, her soul is pure, humane, ultimately innocent and worthy of divine forgiveness.

Disappointed by an impotent and absent husband, Leskov's *Katerina* allows herself to be seduced by a young servant. Adultery turns into blind passion, which leads her to killing her father-in-law, her husband, then an innocent child on the holy night of Easter, and, finally, in deep distraught, one of her seducer's new mistresses. *Katerina Izmailova's* suicide is not a sign of penance, but of revolt. At the opposite end from the eponymous character, she never considered herself guilty of anything, despised Divine and human justice, and believed to the end that lying and murder are paths to happiness. If the reader is convinced that God will forgive *Katerina Kabanova*, the main female character of the play *The Storm* by Alexandr Ostrovsky, the fate of *Katerina Izmailova* in Leskov's novella appears to him as implacable: she will end up in the darkness of hell, where she belongs.

2. Objectives

The aim of this study is to bring to light two of the operatic masterpieces of the 20th century; beyond the interest that the Romanian lyrical theatres might have in them, perhaps one of the Romanian sopranos of great value will include in her own repertoire the two characters: *Katerina Kabanova* and *Katerina Izmailova*.

3. The libretto

Both composers are also authors of the libretto of the music they composed. Even though he knew Russian well, Janáček used a translation of the play into Czech by Vincenc Červinka⁵, while Shostakovich collaborated with Alexandr Preys in adapting the novella⁶. Interested more in the auditory expressiveness of words than in the way they render the plot, both the Czech and the Russian composer almost completely subordinate the libretto to their focus on musical construction and expression.

As it is based on a play, thus most naturally consisting of dialogues, Janáček's main working tool is cutting and shortening Ostrovsky's text. Rarely and only when it is appropriate does he make up small connecting sentences between the various fragments of the original text.

In opposition to the dramatic work, Leskov's novella is rather short and contains few dialogues, so Shostakovich and Preys approach the text in a manner which is opposite to that of Janáček. They create dialogues extracted from the narrative depicting the actions of the characters, to which they add some fragments from other literary works; one of them is even comparatively larger in size. Apart from the names of the main female characters' names and their husbands' cowardly weakly nature and behaviour, this large additional fragment will be discussed below, is perhaps the most important issue that the two operas have in common.

⁵ Czech writer and translator (1877-1942). See https://cs.wikipedia.org/wiki/Vincenc_Červinka, accessed on 12th March 2021.

⁶ Russian writer (1905-1942). See https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Alexander_Preys, accessed on 11th March 2021.

3.1. Janáček *Kát'a Kabanová*

When he decided to write a new piece for the operatic stage, the 65-year-old composer already knew very well the process that a literary work goes through until it is moulded into a lyrical musical piece. He had previously collaborated with several librettists, but unsatisfactory results made him decide to be his own libretto writer. John Tyrrell⁷, one of the most passionate researchers of Janáček's music, who was closely concerned with the composer's life and creation, writes about the libretto of the opera *Kát'a Kabanová*: "as for all his operas based on stage works, Janáček made his own adaptation of *The Thunderstorm*"⁸.

While Alexandr Ostrovsky's play has 5 acts and 41 scenes⁹, Janáček's libretto has 3 Acts and 6 scenes. "As always, he changed the original structure of the play radically to meet his own ends, concentrating on the main dramatic argument, eliminating inessentials and telescoping Ostrovsky's five act into three."¹⁰ In writing the libretto, the composer made the following interventions on the original text: he gave up some entire fragments of text; eliminated and substituted characters; imagined some relationships between characters and made up some cues that did not exist in the play; dialogues between characters other than Ostrovsky's were added; new plot sequences were introduced; fragments of scenes from other acts of the play were embedded between scenes of some acts. "The advantage of this arrangement is that each of the three acts of the opera contains one of the three main events: Tichon's departure (Act 1), Kát'a behaviour while he is away (Act 2) and the crisis when he returns (Act 3)."¹¹ It seems to be a rather complicated labour of transformation, through which Janáček sheds light on the essence of the play and, moreover, gives the measure of his outstanding musical-expressive talent. At the same time, his *Katerina* retains the psychological experiences of the theatrical heroine, who remains unchanged throughout; the music sounds take on the meaning of words in such a way that Ostrovsky would recognize his own character. The Russian composer, however, moves into a completely different direction.

3.2 Shostakovich *Lady Macbeth*

The intervention of Shostakovich and Preys on Leskov's novella is significant and profound; the creation of dialogues between characters – sequences of cues that are quite rare in initial literary work – represent a mere starting point. It is the narrative that carries the core of the conflict imagined by the writer, as the thread of the story has much more content than the dialogues, which are short and rather less expressive. Surprisingly mature for his youth (we should not forget that he is only 24 years old when he starts working on *Lady Macbeth*), the Russian musician has a higher goal – much more important and very precisely defined even before writing the music; the composition of the libretto is only one of the main means in achieving it. Using sounds, he wants to describe a completely different *Katerina* than Leskov's. Therefore, he eliminates some facts (a crime), events (the birth of *Katerina* and *Sergei's* baby, the way in which lovers are caught *in flagrante* and their behaviour towards the police) and

⁷ See [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/John_Tyrrell_\(musicologist\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/John_Tyrrell_(musicologist)), accessed on 10th March 2021.

⁸ John Tyrrell, in Cambridge Opera Handbooks, *Leoš Janáček Kát'a Kabanová*, Cambridge University Press, 1982, p. 48.

⁹ See <http://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/7991> The Project Gutenberg Ebook of *The Storm*, by Aleksandr Nicolaevich Ostrovsky, translated by Constance Garnett.

¹⁰ Hans Hollander, *Leoš Janáček. His life and work*, translated by Paul Hamburger, John Calder, London, 1963, p. 138.

¹¹ John Tyrrell, op. cit., p. 52.

characters¹². Caryl Emerson, one of America's leading specialists in Slavistics¹³, writes that: "But, like most literary plots moved into opera, the libretto departs creatively from its source text. We might note two interrelated categories of infidelity: changes in plot and character, and – more subtly, often involving the musical line as protagonist or the orchestra as narrator – changes in authorial attitude towards the heroes and their fates".¹⁴ However, in order for the new *Katerina* to be revealed according to his own ideas, Shostakovich introduces elements from several scenes from *The Storm* by Alexandr Ostrovsky, whose meaning is fully retained. This is the case of excerpts from scene III and scene V of Act II¹⁵, when the contempt and humiliation to which *Katerina Kabanova* is subjected by her mother-in-law reaches its peak. Kneeling (literally and figuratively) before the husband who is preparing to leave, she swears to him not only absolute fidelity, but also blind obedience to her mother-in-law. The reason why Shostakovich introduces the action and some cues from these scenes in Ostrovsky's play also lies in Leskov who, in the novella, offers a rather unconvincing portrait of *Katerina Izmailova's* father-in-law. Consequently, for greater effect and power of persuasion, *Boris Timofeevich Izmailov* is transformed, taking over the very behaviour and traits of *Marfa Ignatievna Kabanova*, the moral author of her daughter-in-law's suicide. As explained above, here lies the absolute convergence of the two librettos, and implicitly of the two musical pieces.

4. General characteristics of the music

In their works, Janáček and Shostakovich assign to the orchestra a much broader task than that of a simple accompaniment, so that the instruments – individually or in groups of various sizes and timbral structures – sometimes have an importance almost equal to that of the human voices. While the Czech composer's main concern is to extract the melody from the environment, from the words of the people and from the ambient noises, the young Russian composer aims to create a unified musical discourse, in which the words of the human voices merge perfectly with the expressiveness of the instruments.

The sound architecture greatly emphasizes the intentions presented above. Janáček's scenes have almost unbroken continuity, they display some moments that could be labelled as arias, duets or ensembles which are difficult to extract from the context as a whole. Some sound paths, similar to leitmotifs due to their symbolic value can be identified here; they run through the piece from one end to the other, while the choir is present only at the end and is assigned only a few bars. Shostakovich, however, does not hesitate to compose arias and recitatives, several sections of ensemble performance, and quite extensive choirs; all these elements have the ability to retain their musical meanings even when extracted from the context of the opera.

Janáček's music sometimes is close to naturalism, even the darkest colours reveal a certain openness, a hope for redemption, especially due to the abundant presence of high registers. With obvious expressionist touches, Shostakovich's music is filled with ominous ill-boding sounds, from the grave register of the bass clarinet, bassoons and contrabassoon, where there is no room for light and hope. The musical outline of the main heroines has similarities to these features.

¹² For further clarification on the matter, see Leonard Dumitriu, *Libertatea creatoare nestăvilită. Dmitri Șostakoviți și opera Lady Macbeth din districtul Mtsensk*, Editura Muzicală, București, 2020, subcapitolul 1.2.3., *Libertul versus opera literară*, pp. 45-50.

¹³ See <https://slavic.princeton.edu/people/caryl-emerson>, accessed on 15th March 2021.

¹⁴ Caryl Emerson, *Back to the Future: Shostakovich's Revision of Leskov's 'Lady Macbeth of Mtsensk district'*, in *Cambridge Opera Journal*, Vol. 1, No. 1 (Mar., 1989), p. 62.

¹⁵ See footnote no. 9

5. Characteristics of the character *Katerina*

5.1. *Katerina* from *Kát'a Kabanová*

Even though Janáček eliminates a rather large part from the text of Ostrovsky's play, he retains the character of the main heroine unaltered. *Katerina* is the protagonist of most of the musical moments of the opera; the composer assigns the soprano passages of great difficulty, especially in terms of the culminations and the support of the energy releases that they contain. The music is not thematic, it continuously fluctuates, restrictions and enlargements of timbre, melodies, harmonies, nuances, voice and instrumental rhythms follow each other, creating a musical beauty that words can hardly describe. The soprano is almost always part of these sound flows, and her acting and musical score is particularly complex.

In the first scene of Act I, *Katerina* is respectful of her mother-in-law and confesses that she loves her husband. That is why her musical contributions are quite discreet, in low nuances of the middle voice register. However, when her mother-in-law wrongly accuses her of hypocrisy, she retaliates and the cues become sharper, climbing to the high register and present themselves in the extremely high intensities. Scene II introduces *Katerina*'s first important musical fragment, in which she confides in *Varvara*, her husband's step-sister, who has a purely decorative role. The sound is constantly moving forward, like a compact mass from which no themes stand out, but only melodic-rhythmic motifs whose purpose is to support and decorate the wonderful messages of the text. Accompanied by mellow sonorities, from which the flute, oboe and horn timbres stand out, she recalls her happy childhood and the joy of going to church. Gradually, as *Katerina* evokes the wonderful experiences she had in church, and how they made her feel she was flying, the musical tension increases. The past seems to evaporate and the audience is carried into the present; the feelings of the child of yesteryear turn into the dreams of today's woman. The stringed instruments seem to create waves and scents, the brass surges towards ever greater intensities, but instead of the redeeming happiness, the heroine is gripped by the black foreboding of a fall into the abyss, by the vision of hands that push her towards perdition. The musical tumult is suddenly interrupted, making room for sounds that are almost dull and apparently dissonant, associated with *Katerina*'s strange experiences. These are very similar to those we know from the Romanian myth of "Zburătorul" (a mythical charming young male spirit in the Romanian folklore nubile girls fall in love with), a "personification of the longing for the beloved man, of intense affections and desire for the beloved being [...] considered to be the symbol of unrequited love".¹⁶ A wonderful cantilena of the clarinet presents the young woman's erotic emotions, then the oboe seems to create an enchanted melody, while *Katerina* confesses how she cannot resist the temptation to abandon herself to such a man, to run away with him. With such thoughts, she feels greatly ashamed – at this point solo violin intones a diaphanous melody – and categorically refuses the idea of getting to know this man in reality. Distraught, she desperately asks *Tikhon*, her husband, to take her with him on his journey. What follows is a duet in the traditional manner, with cues of both characters; the man's refusal and *Katerina*'s premonition that, on remaining at home with her mother-in-law, she will be the victim of a catastrophe, stand out. The music is particularly tense, trumpets intone repetitive sounds in a fast tempo, horns and trombones pierce the air with their desperate sounds, the rhythm is impetuous. To find her peace of mind, the protagonist wants to swear allegiance to her husband, although he does not ask for it. The appearance of the mother-in-law further darkens the already oppressive atmosphere, especially when she urges her son to order

¹⁶ See <https://ro.wikipedia.org/wiki/Zburătorul>, consulted on 16 March 2021. "Personificare a dorului de bărbatul iubit, a dragostei intense față de ființa iubită [...] considerat simbolul iubirii neîmpărtaşite."

his wife about before leaving. Of course, loyalty and obedience must be the most important virtues. Her humiliation is complete when she must take this oath as she kneels in front of her husband! The end of the scene and of the first act reaches a peak, which is emphasized by a tumultuous orchestral discourse in which all instrumental families join.

In scene I of Act II, *Katerina* has an aria in which she hesitates between refusing happiness and accepting it, thus subjecting herself to a tragic fate. What Janáček masterfully succeeds is the way in which his music captures the hesitations, fearful decisions, thoughts of the sin of loving another man, abandonment in the face of a happiness that can only lead to death. Listening to it, the feeling is of fusing with what one hears and sees, one feels removed from the “here” and the “now”, which are states that very few other musical pieces can engender.

Katerina first meets her lover in Scene II Act II, as they perform a love duet that has some vague references to the great love duet in Act I of Giacomo Puccini's *Madama Butterfly*. At first the young woman rejects *Boris*'s insistent advances – the composer makes abundant use of repetitions and imitations of a chromatic musical motif; however, at some point she succumbs and confesses her boundless love. Through continuous harp arpeggios, melodies performed by violins in the acute register, undulating calls of cellos, the music leaves the tension of rejection and reaches the serenity of shared love. The duet ends with symbolic calls of the two lovers, in the over-high register, which the orchestra accompanies with a victorious voluptuousness.

The final act highlights a completely different *Katerina*. In scene I, filled with remorse and dire premonitions, she confesses her guilt towards her husband and mother-in-law through extremely difficult passages, most of them in the high register. It is a new musical struggle of the heroine with her own phantasms, yet now guilt, sin, the need for penance dominate. In Scene II, Janáček exquisitely builds the path to the denouement. Without further hesitation, *Katerina* wants to see *Boris* once more before her death. Her monologue, unfolding for many minutes, is one of the most beautiful musical pages of the 20th century! Taking into account the distance in time and the obvious stylistic differences, it can be compared with the famous “madness” aria of *Lucia di Lammermoor* by Gaetano Donizetti. The role forces the soprano to take her vocal endurance, interpretive maturity, ability to merge with the character, to extreme levels. The prompt reunion of the two is calm, but the music conveys each of the protagonists' regret and despondency, so the listener may wonder whether *Katerina*'s suicide may be a better solution than a barren life, without any ideals to light it, that awaits *Boris*. The gesture of the heroine is a form of sacrifice on the altar of true, pure and eternal love, while the man is thrown into oblivion.

Perhaps, at a different age and without going through the events that his own life had in store for him, Janáček would not have been able to write such charming music that, along with the main heroine, would produce such an overwhelming impression on the listener.

5.2. *Katerina of Lady Macbeth*

The first impression that *Katerina Izmailova* creates to the spectator is that of a deeply unhappy woman; the soprano accompanied by the orchestra conveys this feeling from the moment the curtain is raised, through a recitative which is very close to an arioso. The aria that immediately follows in Act I, in which the young wife shows her despondency for not getting to know love as it is experienced not only by humans, but also by other beings, including animals, reveals a character whose future actions are difficult to predict. The exasperation of a withering soul and body is expressed masterfully, the accumulations of unfulfilled desires are

presented as a gradual move towards the explosion in the culminating phrase of the aria, as the revolt against this state is imminent. Disturbing and dramatic, the fragment anticipates that, in order to achieve happiness, the heroine will make use of all means, including lying, infidelity, murder. Through artistically driven vocal and instrumental tracks, Shostakovich's music manipulates the audience in the sense that, empathizing with the heroine's suffering, the audience sympathize with her from the very beginning and are almost ready to excuse her subsequent actions.

Unhappiness is only the first of *Katerina Izmailova's* personality traits. Perhaps somewhat unexpectedly for her, the man who makes her know bodily pleasure and fulfilment also makes her addicted to it. At first, he rejects her, and even fights with her; these actions are suggested by the composer in a music whose message is exactly the opposite of the characters' lines. Although *Katerina* (mistress of the house) shows only contempt for *Sergei* (the servant), the fluctuating rhythm and meandering melodies, the overall sonority of this "struggle" reveals an irrepressible attraction. The scene of passionate love between the two, for which the opera was violently rejected by Stalin, displays terrible elements of Expressionism; the slips of trombones and the onomatopoeia of other instruments are in fact the sound images of brutal voluptuousness.

For love of *Sergei*, the man of her life, *Katerina* is capable of doing anything. She rebels against her father-in-law, who accuses her of not being able to bear children; her musical contributions in the acute register, which touch the A flat and B-flat of the second octave, express the abhorrence and rejection of the accusation. In the musical fragment in which she poisons *Boris Timofeevich* she is very calm and calculated, then even cynical as she refuses him the glass of water that could quench the burning feeling of the poison. Instead, she does not hesitate to hypocritically weep for him in front of other people; in this musical section Shostakovich appeals to stylized sound elements of Russian folklore. In fact, she does not regret the killing of the old man at all, but sees it as a natural reaction of punishment for her suffering. However, this does not protect her against the ghost of the murdered man, who comes to haunt her in her dreams. The torments of her phantasms are rendered masterfully by a turbid, oppressive music, in which the lower registers are again prevalent.

Katerina is downright disgusted by her husband *Zinovi Izmailov*. Upon his return home, in response to his accusations of infidelity, she defies him, hits him and ends up killing him with the help of her lover. After committing the murder, right next her deceased husband, she declares *Sergei* as her new husband! Shostakovich's music is terrifying, disturbing, but, in the listener's mind, there is still room for forgiveness.

Once she is on the way to Siberia, where she will serve her sentence given by the humans, *Katerina* shows unexpected tenderness, but also a naivety she did not seem capable of. In accord with her heart, the music seems a cry and a sigh revealing her longing for her lover, who ruthlessly deceives her and, in inclement frosty weather, makes her give him the warm stockings she is wearing. However, the stockings immediately get to cover another, female, convict's feet! In the face of this betrayal, *Katerina's* soul hardens. She performs a gloomy aria, whose music is as restrained as it is overwhelming; in it she talks about the pitch-black waters of a deep lake. It is the musical expression of her decision to leave this world, which she leaves without regrets, dragging *Sergei's* unfortunate mistress with her in the swirling waters of the Volga river.

Undoubtedly Shostakovich has fully achieved the goal he had set for himself. His *Katerina* is a woman capable of infidelity and murder; however, above all, she is also capable of love and sacrifice, and the music exquisitely highlights all these features. With extraordinary

conceptual mastery, the Russian composer creates a sound universe in which understanding and forgiveness are the feelings that ultimately reach the listener's soul.

6. Conclusions

While being very different in terms of musical language, in their works, Janáček and Shostakovich portrayed female characters that are emblematic of 19th century Russian literature, producing two of the most successful works of the 20th century. Having the same name, *Katerina*, their heroines have some similar, but also some different features, so there is no valid motivation to introduce a hierarchy between them. They were well received not only in Russia and what is now the Czech Republic, but also in Western Europe and the Americas; the works *Kát'a Kabanová* and *Lady Macbeth from the Mtsensk District*, and implicitly the characters *Katerina Kabanova* and *Katerina Izmailova*, are totally unknown to the Romanian public. This study is intended as an introduction, an incentive for Romanian managers, conductors and directors, as well as singers, on the one hand to discover two very valuable works, and on the other new opportunities to demonstrate their own artistic skills and talent.

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