
Topos of Stiva Oblonsky's *Ribald Dream* and Lev Tolstoy's *Philosophical Conception of Music*

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In a letter to Tchaikovsky, Lev Tolstoy called music “the highest art in the world.” Tolstoy inherited from his family the love for music: as a youth, he prepared for a musical career and played the piano three-four hours a day, studied music theory and actually wrote several pieces for piano. He had a music insight better than many of the musical critics of his time and his assessment of music performers was appreciated by Russian musicians. He met with Anton Rubinstein and Alexander Dargomuzhsky; Alexander Scriabin and Sergei Rakhmaninov played in his house in Khamovniki, Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov visited him at Yasnaya Polyana, while Fyodor Shalyapin sang for him in Moscow. His favorite composer was Chopin, although Beethoven had a more powerful effect on him. His unconventional view on music shocked and infuriated music lovers and was the object of debates in Russia and Europe. Tolstoy had always considered opera an artificial art—although he praised Mozart’s *Don Giovanni*—and preferred it to folk music played on folk instruments. In his book on art, he tried to find the essence of music and argued that among all arts, music produced the most powerful effect on human emotions. He marveled why sounds of different pitch and degrees of strength, separate or sounding together in a rhythmic pattern, were able to have an irresistible impact on man. Tolstoy’s family often heard him play piano before starting his writerly work. Tolstoy stated: “Когда слушаешь музыку, это побуждает к художественному творчеству.” (“When you listen to music it enhances artistic creativity” my trans.) (Goldenweiser, 160).

Tolstoy’s characters have a special relationship with music. For Nikolenka in *Youth* playing the piano is a means to seduce maidens and Iosif Eiges affirms that through the perception of music Tolstoy depicts his character’s vanity and inner emptiness (Eiges, <http://feb-web.ru/feb/tolstoy/critics/est/est-241-.htm>). Musical talent and passion for music redeems an immoral artist in the short story “Albert”, while the performance of the first movement of Kreutzer Sonata marshals the plot of the novella of the same name and motivates Poszdnyshev to crime. Likewise, in *War and Peace*, Natasha’s singing brings Nikolay Rostov to a reevaluation of the conventions of the officer code of honor.

I argue that Tolstoy’s recourse to music in Stiva Oblonsky’s dream as a topos disclosing the character’s persona and its associated life world. Music from Mo-

zart’s operas echoing in Stiva’s dream enables him to explain away his family scandal. Although the dream is an insertion without narrative consequences in the text of the novel, it also allows the reader to see how Prince Stepan Arkadievich Oblonsky—or Stiva, as he was called in society—identifies himself subconsciously with the philandering hero from Mozart’s opera *Don Giovanni* and simultaneously with Prince Tamino, the rescuer of his bewitched lover in *The Magic Flute*. Tolstoy applies his musical aesthetics in the construction of his protagonists so that the hero’s personal feelings for music serve as a device for character’s representation and development. Music in Stiva Oblonsky’s dream is used by Tolstoy to reveal his protagonist’s inner world, his convictions and moral (or rather immoral) code. The action in *Anna Karenina* starts with Stepan Arkadievich Oblonsky awakening from a pleasant phantasmagorical dream after a family scandal provoked by his infidelity. His attempt to remember the dream is presented as a stream of consciousness:

Ah yes, now how did that go? he thought, trying to recall his dream. “Ah yes, how did that go? Yes! Alabin was giving a dinner in Darmstadt; no not Darmstadt, something American. Yes, but then Darmstadt was in America. Yes, Alabin was giving a dinner on glass tables, yes—and the tables were singing *Il mio tesoro*—no, not *Il mio tesoro*, something even better, and there were tiny decanters, and they were women, too,” he recalled. Stepan Arcadievich’s eyes twinkled, and he lapsed into reverie, smiling. “Yes, that was fine, very fine. And there were so many more excellent things to it, even awake you could never put it all into words and ideas. (Tolstoy, 3-4)

The reader’s attention is captured by Stiva’s dream imagery with glass music and women as glass-decanters. Vladimir Nabokov in his brief analysis of the opening scene wrote: “The interesting point is that Steve’s light-hearted, transparent, philandering, epicurean nature is cunningly described by the author through the imagery of a dream. This is the device for introducing Oblonski: a dream introduces him” (Nabokov, 153). Nabokov does not give us an interpretation of the role of music in Stiva’s dream, although on a different occasion he mentions that *Il mio tesoro* is sung by Antonio, Mozart’s hero who is much more moral than Oblonsky in his fidelity to women.

Literary critics writing about Stiva's dream have many interesting suggestions. James Rice, in his article, "Some Observations on Stiva's Dream," points out that in the early version of Anna Karenina, Tolstoy used the name Alabin for Oblonsky and suggests that in Stiva's dream Alabin may be his alter ego. After Rice, Stiva's dream expresses "a wish for unencumbered security from the importunings of conventional virtue and conjugal duty" (Rice, 120), and that longing for adultery without consequences means that he unconsciously wishes to escape to German Darmstadt or to far America. The singing glasses, which are some sort of women-decanter symbolize Stiva's sexual pleasures in food, drinking and philandering, although the danger of accountability manifests through the famous aria *Il mio tesoro* by Don Ottavio in Mozart's opera *Don Giovanni*, where Don Ottavio promises to avenge against Don Giovanni who had seduced his fiancée. The dream indicates Stiva's desire to escape from responsibility and to search oblivion in the dream of life. Stiva's pleasure-seeking life-style is justified by an Epicurean approach that defines his immorality. Peter Marzalik in his essay, "Oblivion in Tolstoy's I," states that by equating his love affair to a fragrant "sweet roll," Stiva solidifies the relationship between food and sexuality and supports Helena Goschilo's conviction that Tolstoy tends to treat food functionally: "As an advocate of vegetarianism and strenuous toil, Tolstoy heartily despises all that Stiva represents" (Goschilo, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/4208958>). Mikhail Bakhtin, however, does not seem to think that Tolstoy judges his protagonist so rigorously. Stiva takes life occurrences and love affairs easily, has no spiritual crises and his cheating does not lead to serious consequences. Although this is against moral principles it justifies the writer's artistic vision (Bakhtin, 258). Indeed, Stiva is the only major protagonist who does not undergo psychological development and in the end remains the same charming Epicurean as he was four years ago.

Nevertheless, investigation of Tolstoy's choice of music in Stiva's dream gives us insight into his less obvious traits that make him a more complex character. What music does sound have in his dream and what effect does it have on him? *Il mio tesoro* refers us to the archetypal womanizing-hero in Mozart's opera *Don Giovanni* and Tolstoy-the artist provides deceiving clues to an inattentive reader. The complete title of opera is "*Il dissoluto punito, ossia il Don Giovanni*," literally *The Rake Punished, or Don Giovanni*. Dolly, with the heart broken by Stiva's unfaithfulness, calls him "a dissolute father" and Stiva ironically refers to his work place as "a den," in the sense of a "place for illicit affairs." The question is with whom does Stiva identify himself, with Don Giovanni or with his adversary, Don Ottavio, whose aria *Il mio tesoro* is the promise for vengeance against the libertine?

It might seem that images of women-carafes symbolize women as object of pleasure associated with sex and drinking and Stiva's unsubstantial personality is reduced to these aspects. However, Stiva is not just a consumer of food and sex, nor is he also the embodiment of elegant mediocrity. His dream is rooted in Mozart's music and the imagery of singing glass tables with crystal women-carafes is associated with the composer's two works for singing glasses, *Quintet for Glass Harmonica, Flute, Oboe, Viola, and Cello in C minor*, K.617 (musical glasses) and *Adagio for Glass Harmonica in C*, K.356. Mozart's graceful and light melodies are for glass harmonica—or singing glasses—a common musical instrument in the 18th century, with unreliable tuning and extremely hard to play. They remained in the 19th century a party trick performed on crystal drinking glasses tuned to different notes by filling them with liquid at different levels. It is the party trick that echoes in Stiva's subconscious and merges with his imagery of women as a source of sexual and aesthetic pleasure. As a Mozart fan, Stiva knew that the Austrian composer considered his last opera *The Magic Flute* his best work, it was played 100 times in one year and on his death bed he asked to have it played for him. The context of Mozart's music in Stiva's dream suggests that the melody "even better than *Il mio tesoro*" which Stiva had heard was one of the well known arias from this opera. Stiva identified himself with its charming hero, Prince Tamino, who had rescued Pamina, the daughter of the Queen of the Night, from evil spells.

For Tolstoy, music is reminiscent of our feelings experienced in the past. In the draft for *Childhood* he explains why music has different effect on men. The idea that our feelings produced by music are connected with memories of the past, are also expressed in his multiple essays on art and in fiction. Light cheerful music by Mozart evokes in Stiva pleasant memories. Mozart's music as echo of some experience that Stiva never had had is a substitute for unpleasant reality. Shamefully caught by Dolly, he does not truly blame himself and justifies his infidelity by his good health and sexual appetites. Dolly's accusation against him as a dissolute father does not lie heavily on his consciousness and the musical plot line of promiscuous Don Giovanni fades away in the din of singing glasses. On the other hand, Don Ottavio's beautiful aria when he is seeking revenge and justice, does not sound tragic in Mozart's opera. In Stiva's dream, it resonates with his slight remorse, not morally but aesthetically. He admits that an affair with a governess is trivial and vulgar:

True, it was not good that she had been a governess in our own house. Not good at all! There is something common, vulgar even, about making love to

one's own governess. But what a governess! (He enthusiastically recalled Mademoiselle Roland's mischievous black eyes, and her smile.) It is true, though, that as long as she was in our house, I never took any liberties. Worst of all, she is already... You'd think it was all on purpose! Oh my, oh my! But what, what am I to do? (Tolstoy, 5)

Stiva does spell out even in his thoughts what is this "the worst" in Mlle Roland's situation, when "she is already...", and Tolstoy leaves it to our imagination. However, at lunch with Levin Stiva, he talks about his French mistress as she were a meek, gentle and loving creature who had sacrificed herself for their love: "You must understand that the woman is a dear, meek, loving creature, poor and lonely, and she has sacrificed everything. Now that the deed is done—you understand me—how can I abandon her?" (Tolstoy, 40).

Apparently, Stiva sees it differently: "Mlle Roland's mischievous black eyes," and unconsciously justifies his sexual allowance by regarding himself as a rescuer, lover-savior on a higher mission, a type of Prince Tamino. Framed by Mozart's music Alabin's dinner in Darmstadt in America refers us to Mozart's librettist, Lorenzo Da Ponte, who was banished for 15 years from Venice for his dissolute life. In Vienna, he collaborated with both Mozart and Salieri and wrote the libretti for Mozart's *The Marriage of Figaro*, *Così fan tutte*, and *Don Giovanni*. Dismissed from Imperial Service, Da Ponte arrived to New York, taught at the Colombia college and founded the first American opera theater, the New York Opera Company, the predecessor of the New York Metropolitan Opera. Lorenzo Da Ponte died in 1838 and an enormous funeral ceremony was held for him in New York. The events of Anna Karenina unfold in 1874, 36 years after Da Ponte's death. Da Ponte's memoirs in the manner of a picaresque adventure story were published in 1823 and it is likely that Stiva, fluent in French, English and German, had read it. Stiva links the life of Da Ponte with his libretto for Don Giovanni and therefore America as the Da Ponte's space appears in his dream as the location of his friend Alabin's dinner.

Alexander Goldenweiser, a prominent Russian pianist, friend, personal secretary and follower of Tolstoy's teaching, in his book, *Near Tolstoy*, noted that Tolstoy loved Mozart, although he saw in his music traces of vulgarity. What Tolstoy saw as vulgarity and sublime in Mozart matches with Stiva's nature. In his affair with the French governess, Stiva perceives his mistress as a tragic

heroine, however, his love for Mozart shows his elegance, musical appreciation and charming but superficial quest for high aspirations. Stiva's musical taste is explained by the author's attitude to his character. Sharing with his protagonist the love for Mozart the writer stresses Stiva's sensitivity and makes him a deeper character, immediate and spontaneous like the Austrian composer. At the same time, Stiva is fond of Johann Strauss' operetta *Fledermaus*—he recites its couplets to Levin. His fondness for the waltz king and for light opera gives him a touch of shallowness.

Tolstoy's choice of music in Stiva's dream is a construct that adds to his characterization as literary persona, giving us insight into his less obvious traits and makes him a more complex character.

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