Music as Theme and as Structural Model in Chekhov's *Three Sisters**

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Abstract: Music plays a significant role in Chekhov's *Three Sisters*. It functions at least in three distinct ways:

1. AS SOUND: The play's text includes a lot of instructions to produce sounds (musical and non-musical); these are often semanticised, acquiring and evoking extra-musical functions and meanings by interactions with words, events and actions on stage. Non-musical sounds (e.g., fire-bells) also enrich the play's sheer acoustic texture.
2. AS THEME: Often, this typically has little to do with actual sounds on stage. Thus, the refusal of Masha (the middle sister, a gifted pianist) to play after her father's death is, of course, inaudible. Likewise, no sounds are produced by contrasts between personages' attitudes to music. Such contrasts also characterise music itself as a means of human communication. They are essential to the *theme* of music. Themes are not heard.
3. AS STRUCTURAL MODEL: This means the organisation of non-musical materials in drama/theatre in ways analogous to organisations of musical ones in works of music (e.g., contrapuntal interrelations). In *Three Sisters*, music is communicated to the play's audience through a large variety of auditory, cognitive, associative, analogous (etc.) means, many of which are associated neither with sounds nor with music as theme.

In addition, the article offers a typology of complexities in literature-drama, on the one hand, and in music, on the other hand.

Keywords: Chekhov's plays; complexities in the arts; music as a system of communications; music as theme; interart (verbal-musical) analyses.

1. Introduction: Potential-Realisation Relationships as Underlying Structural Principle in Chekhov's Later Work[1]

A.P. Chekhov's later work, and particularly the later drama, is organised thematically as pairs, chains, clusters, and/or systems of relationships among themes, ideas, characters,

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[1] The views presented in section 1 as a series of statements are to be fully developed in my book *The Presence of Absence: Towards a Poetics of Chekhov's Later Drama* (in preparation), where they will be furnished with textual and bibliographical evidence.

***Min-Ad** Editor's comment:* The author wrote this note in 1984, as part of this article. The preparation of the book, however, took him another thirty years. Below is the bibliographic data of that book; Golomb, Harai, 2014. *A New Poetics of Chekhov's Plays: Presence through Absence*. Brighton, Chicago and Toronto: Sussex Academic Press. An interview with Harai Golomb (by Marina Ritzarev), concerning work on the book, is placed on pages 123-37 of this volume.

etc., all describable as *potentials and (non) realisations*. I contend that this near-obsession with potential-realisation relationships is so central, so total and all-pervasive in the later Chekhovian text and world-view, that it amounts to his own personal "underlying structure",[2] accounting more than anything else for the uniqueness of his poetics; it is a kind of *differentia specifica Chekhoviana*. As such, it is a very useful tool for characterising Chekhov's work and world along any comparative axis, whether synchronic, diachronic or panchronic.

Thus, for instance, since Chekhov equally stresses both the existence-and-worth of the human potential and the inevitability of its non-realisation, he can be sharply and equally distinguished on the diachronic axis from two groups of authors: (a) his predecessors (and many contemporaries) in literature and drama, who share with him only the high valuation of the human potential, and (b) his successors (notably the "absurd" playwrights and authors), who share with him only the sense of its inevitable non-realisation. It is this uniquely Chekhovian combination which makes him too complex for some reductionist critics (in the East and the West alike), who perpetuate the futile controversy about whether Chekhov's view of reality and mankind is "positive-optimistic" or "negative-pessimistic". Those critics, no matter which side they are on, oversimplify the picture by failing to reconcile Chekhov's genuine respect for the great potential of the human mind, spirit, talent, compassion etc., with his uncompromising, often relentless pursuit of his characters in their flight into illusion and self-deception, and the false hope of realising those potentials. To him, the unrealised potential of a character is more tangible than many "hard facts", because it constitutes a mental driving-force, motivating wishes, yearnings, actions and inactions; it is a "presence of absence". The greater the potential, the more actively frustrating its non-realisation (or the more present its absence). Lesser potentials, unworthy of realisation according to Chekhov's values,[3] are often realised, however, and their actual presence makes even more poignant the sense of deprivation resulting from the non-fulfilment of the greater potential. Thus, for instance, In *Three Sisters* Natasha and Kulygin fully realise their meagre, narrow potentials and feel themselves fulfilled, satisfied people; moreover, Natasha sees to it that her children are given the best opportunities to realise their potentialities which Chekhov regards as non-existent (since they are to be educated by her, taught by a Kulygin and surrounded by the stifling atmosphere of Protopopov's direct and indirect presence and the provincial township). On the other hand, the sisters retain their relatively high potentials to the end, but they are deprived, through the actions of internal (mental) and external forces, of the conditions essential for realising them. Schematically,[4] then, the three generations of Prozorovs can be described as: (a) "potential-realised" or "presence-of-presence" (the deceased father); (b) "potential-unrealised" or "presence-of-absence" (the sisters and Andrey); and (c) "non-potential-realised", or "absence-of-presence" (Bobik and Sofochka). It is important to note, however, that only (b) is represented in the text, whereas both (a) and (c) are "present absences" *textually*. This is no accident: the later Chekhov always tends to focus attention on the more complex, the more meaningful and semantically loaded. It is to a great extent through the unrealised potential of his characters that he realises his own, and his texts', literary potentials.

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[2] I am indebted to my friend and colleague Dr. Menakhem Perry's theory of "semantic 'deep structure' of poets." So far the theory has not been published in full, but only effectively applied to several Hebrew poets (in a Hebrew article). Prof. Perry cannot be held responsible, then, for the inevitably partial employment of his theory here.

[3] How and to what extent a structured hierarchy of values can be extracted and abstracted from Chekhov's writings is one of the questions I shall tackle in the book (see note 1).

The basic thematic structure in Chekhov's later work, then, is usually trichotomic (in contrast to the dichotomic structure typical of most pre-Chekhov drama). The trichotomy consists of (a) a (normatively positive) potential; (b) its hypothetical realisation (once again, of course, normatively positive, but factually non-existent); (c) its non-realisation (factually present, normatively negative). This scheme is occasionally modified or changed (see note 4), but it does prevail in most cases.

Moreover, this basic trichotomy applies equally to characters (e.g., Andrey's or Irina's potential, to fulfil him- or herself as a human being – in love, work, education etc.) and to themes and phenomena as such (e.g., love and marriage, work, education and knowledge, music and art, science, verbal and nonverbal human communication, the learning of foreign languages, etc.). The relationships between these two applications of the basic trichotomic scheme can be accommodated within the model of reversible hierarchies:[5] in order to generalise about the potential-realisation make-up of a given character, one has to describe the manifestations of that make-up in the different domains of his life and personality (i.e., love, work, education, etc.); but the reverse is also true: in order to generalise about the potential-realisation make-up of a given theme (love, work, etc., in the play as a whole) one has to describe the manifestations of that make-up in the various characters. Thus a character is both higher and lower than a theme in a hierarchy of levels of generalisation; hence the concept of *reversible* hierarchies.

The potential-realisation principle in its structural trichotomic manifestation is even more powerfully present in Chekhov's syntagmatic compositional techniques, i.e., in the way he puts together successive text-segments, than in his thematic organisation. In *Three Sisters* there is no single exception to the basic rule of balance and emotional restraint, whereby emotionally loaded potentials, which conventionally generate (in readers and spectators) expectations of emotional or sentimental outbursts or excessive reactions, are *always* followed by "disruptive" elements which frustrate the conventional expectation. Thus the anticipated outburst, or other venting of emotional tension, is doomed to stay forever an unrealised potential, a present absence. A far cry from the lukewarm diluted "understatement" some critics would have us believe it is, Chekhovian restraint is comparable to a barrel of explosives, under which Chekhov constantly keeps a fire alive while tightening the hermetically sealed lid. Paradigmatically and syntagmatically, thematically and compositionally, Chekhov's poetics is one of powerfully present absences, of real potentials unrealised, of tangible, specific and poignant expectation that in spite – and perhaps because – of being barred from materialising in reality, make up the true fabric of that reality more than "material" events.

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[4] It is difficult to think of an author whose work defies neat schemas and trite "isms" more than Chekhov's. One of the chief aims of the detailed discussion in my book (see note 1) is to expose the limitations of the various schemas, including this one, in the face of the infinite variety of Chekhovian subtleties.

[5] I am indebted to my colleague and teacher Prof. B. Hrushovski, from whom I have learned some of the most fundamental concepts and models of theoretical thinking in poetics, including this one. See Benjamin Hruskovski, *Segmentation and Motivation in the Text Continuum of Literary Prose* [The First Episode of *War and Peace*] (Tel-Aviv University: The Porter Institute for Poetics and Semiotics [PPS 5], 1976), pp.4-6, especially 1.2.5. (p.6).

The author adds: Since the original publication of this article, Prof. Hrushovski changed his surname into Harshav; he died in April 2015.

2. Music in *Three Sisters*: Theme, Sound and Technique

Chekhov has often been described as a "musical" author and (particularly) playwright.[6] In using the term "music" or "musical" some scholars fail to distinguish between at least three separate, and not necessarily interdependent, meanings that are applicable in this context: thematic, auditory and structural. Thus, "music" in a non-poetic literary text[7] can function: (a) as a theme, when (a part of) the text is written "about" music, musicians, playing, singing, etc.; (b) as sound-through-reference, when the "world" of the story (through our auditory imagination) or the play (through direct appeal to the sense of hearing) resonates with musical sounds and "meaningful noises", as T. Winner puts it;[8] (c) as an active model for organising and structuring the text itself, by making (parts of) it music-like in texture and patterning (i.e., by simulating or even producing simultaneity of semantic messages, by developing "motifs" through music-like techniques, etc.). It is self-evident that each of the three can easily exist without the others; in Chekhov – with varying degrees in different works – all three can be found, and in *Three Sisters* they coexist and interact with each other. In the present article, however, I shall confine myself to a detailed discussion of meaning (a) only, while the other two will be dealt with more briefly, awaiting fuller discussion in my book (see note 1), since music-like techniques are so frequent and varied in *Three Sisters* that only in a long discussion can one even attempt to do justice to their numerous subtleties.

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[6] See, for instance, N.A. Nilsson, "Intonation and Rhythm in Chekhov's Plays", in *Chekhov: A Collection of Critical Essays*, edited by R.L. Jackson (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1967), pp.161-174, and T.G. Winner, "Syncretism in Chekhov's Art: A Study of Polystructured Texts", in *Chekhov's Art of Writing: A Collection of Critical Essays*, edited by P. Debreczeny and T. Eekman (Columbus, Ohio: Slavica, 1977), pp.151-165.

[7] Direct appeals to the ear through the foregrounding of the sounds of language, as in the prosodic organisation of poetry, are definitely a fourth meaning of "musical" in the language of certain critics, but it stays outside the scope of this discussion.

[8] Winner, "Syncretism in Chekhov's Art", p.159.

2.1. Music as Theme: Communicative Potentials and (Non-) Realisations

2.1.1. Introduction

So far I have not come across a full-fledged discussion of the *theme* of music in *Three Sisters*, although some sporadic insights have been offered. Most discussions tend to speak in the same breath about all sound-effects, mentioning neither their different functions nor the soundless manifestations of the theme of music.

Thus, it is true that a long catalogue of sound – e.g., Andrey's violin- and Tuzenbakh's piano-playing, the nurse-maid's lullaby-singing off-stage in Act II, Masha's whistling (Act I), the ringing of bells (Act III), the musical sounds of accordion and guitar, humming and mumbling of tunes and "nonsense" sounds by different characters – can be reconstructed from the play, and it is true that in the play's nonverbal auditory texture all of these sounds, and many others, play a part. Yet, I think that generalising about "meaningful noises" – an apt phrase in itself, to be sure – is simply not enough, because the function of music in *Three Sisters* is far more complex and manifold than a generalising approach would imply. Thus, no sound is heard from Masha's apparent *refusal* to play the piano, resulting in her forgetting how to play, or from Irina's simile likening her soul to a precious locked-up piano whose key has been lost. Nevertheless both of these "present absences" do belong to the theme of music in the play and they are much more closely related to non-musical themes and events (e.g., Masha's refusal to play is analogous to her refusal to set her foot in the house ever again (Act IV), and Irina's "precious piano" is analogous to her "white birds" and her own Moscow) than to sounds that do not belong to the theme of music. Even Andrey's violin-playing, which is acoustically present on stage, is meaningfully analogous to some of his non-musical actions, and – by contrast – to Masha's refraining from playing, while it has little or no connection to many musical and non-musical sounds in the play.

What, then, is the function of music as a theme in the play? In order to answer this question one has to let *sense* prevail over *the senses* and to place music squarely where it belongs in the play's network of *themes, ideas and values,* rather than in the context of sound-effects and stage directions.

In his treatment of the theme of music – just as in the case of comparable themes of general human appeal, like love, work, education, etc. – Chekhov carefully balances between the general and the particular. On the one hand, he lets the key-word of the theme resound and echo, activating its cloud of conventional, culture-conditioned associations. (This practice is largely responsible for the misleading impression of banality that his plays often make on novices.) But, on the other hand, he always makes even the tritest of themes acquire new and unique content through its interaction with a person or a context-of-situation for whom or for which it signifies something special and specific. This "something" hardly ever revolutionises the familiar concept; rather, it modifies and specifies it, as a variation on a theme.

This is usually achieved through a process of mutual selection of the relevant and elimination of the irrelevant for the given interaction. Thus, out of the universal potentialities of the term "music" in its thematic capacity, the specific context of the Prozorovs and their friends selects a few (e.g., a means of nonverbal emotional communication, a part of the higher-class education, a part of Western culture and civilisation) while rejecting others (e.g., that music can be played or sung, performed by soloists, chamber groups, choirs and orchestras, etc.). Similarly, out of the potentialities inherent in the Prozorovs and their friends, music selects certain features as relevant to it and eliminates others as irrelevant or less relevant.

Music in *Three Sisters* is first and foremost a means of communication. And, in a truly Chekhovian manner, it represents different spheres, types and degrees of communicative potentials and realisations, doing so (once again in a typically Chekhovian way) not through direct statements but through a network of oblique analogies and juxtapositions that the text supplies as potentials to be realised *by us*, as readers and spectators, and – in Prof. Harshav's (see note 5) terminology – as *understanders.* One of the fields in which Chekhov is a genuine precursor of twentieth-century literature is in the essential, inescapable role he assigns to his readers/spectators as integrators of seemingly sporadic, unrelated details. While in all complex literature such integration enriches and deepens meanings and messages, in Chekhov it is often a precondition for interest (as opposed to boredom) and sometimes for making sense on the most elementary level.

2.1.2. Music and the Prozorovs

The Prozorovs are the product of the mentally maiming education of their father. The late General (it is amazing how powerfully present this absent character is) "oppressed us [his children] with education", as Andrey puts it in Act I.[9] This education comprised everything that, according to the father's strongly held convictions, was proper for a general's children to learn in order to be well-educated human beings; this included, *inter alia*, foreign languages, science (for the only son in the family), and music. Thus, to the four living Prozorovs music was inseparably linked with their father's hierarchy of values, with his heritage and education. No doubt, when a Prozorov plays a musical instrument on stage he contributes to the musical orchestration of the scene and the play as a whole; but, more significantly, he makes an implicit, unconscious statement which betrays his deeply felt attitude towards himself and his world. Music, being the only nonverbal and potentially directly emotional part of the father's heritage, is a "natural" means of making nonverbal and subconscious statements-of-attitude of this kind.

Chekhov here very skilfully combines the two aspects of music: the Prozorov-specific and the universally-human. Being conditioned by the specific family history does not deprive music of its universal traits – notably, a non-referential, nonverbally expressive and emotionally loaded means of human communication. This is music's potential; but it can be realised in different ways by different people with different potentials for realizing its potential. Against the background of broad and narrow common denominators in relation to music – the one shared by all mankind and the other shared by the Prozorovs – the sharp differences between two individuals, Andrey and Masha, are clearly marked. Both of them were taught to play by order of the same father within the same family educational framework; both have experienced the death of the father and the downfall of the house, the Moscow dream, etc. Their reactions, however, are diametrically opposed: Andrey goes on playing (always backstage, always alone), whereas Masha, who is reliably reported as having been an excellent gifted pianist in the past, is said (in Act III) to have "forgotten" her skill, having refrained from playing more or less since her father's death (a simple inference from the time indications in Acts I and III).

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[9] The father's education does not emerge as *altogether* negative in the play. I cannot go into this complex and fascinating subject here.

Andrey's playing is indicative of his ambivalence, internal weakness and subconscious guilt in relation to everything connected with his father's heritage, kept alive through his sisters' expectations of him. As far as the conscious part of it all is concerned – his university studies and plans to become a professor of science, including his attitude to foreign languages and translations – his behaviour is clear: he discontinues all activities that tie him to his family's heritage and expectations. The resulting conflict and guilt are subconscious for the greater part of the play; and playing the violin is his refuge from his plight. Thus, violin-playing serves as a device to characterise Andrey in general. He escapes confrontation, tries to smooth over things, and secretly and passively rebels against whatever his father stands for – by over-eating, by joining the town council, by neglecting his studies, by marrying Natasha and ignoring her infidelity, secretly taking futile revenge by gambling, but staying on as a husband who pushes baby-carriages when so instructed. His attitude to music reflects the same pattern: he clings to the least demanding but the most emotionally viable and soothing part of childhood and his father's education, while rejecting the demanding and "oppressive" parts. To him, violin-playing is not a means of communicating with other people, but a means of escaping the present through one-way subconscious "communication" with his own past. Under these circumstances, music serves as an anti-communicative means. This attitude of his reaches its peak in the fire scene (Act III), when Andrey's violin signifies his inability to react even to such an event as the fire.

Masha, unlike her brother, is (relatively) the most conscious, outspoken and uncompromising of the Prozorovs. These character traits are very obvious and have been pointed out by most analysts. What has been rather overlooked, however, is the exact manner in which she puts these traits to work. She never seeks conflict, never preaches her convictions to those directly concerned. She never stoops to confront Natasha, never tells Andrey directly what she thinks of him, etc. But, unlike her brother, she makes no secret of her views, and would never do or say anything in order to please or to be liked. Her policy is to avoid any contact with falsehood and pretence, but not to challenge them, not to fight back, and certainly not to rally support. Thus, for instance, she would not go near her parents' former house once it became Natasha's, and declares it openly – but, typically, out of Natasha's hearing range (Act IV); she dissociates herself from Andrey's behaviour, but would not confront him; etc. Her attitude to music, too, bears her unmistakable mark: unlike Andrey, she senses that music was meaningful only as long as it was part of a living hierarchy of values. When General Prozorov died, and the entire educational and spiritual fabric of the family disintegrated, she could not go on pretending that nothing had changed; she could not engage in an activity which had lost its meaning and *raison d'être*; but, typically, she did not make an issue of it but simply stopped playing. Just as knowing foreign languages in the provincial town was, to her, "superfluous as a sixth finger" (Act I), so was playing the piano without the atmosphere and the environment that gave it meaning. Thus, Masha is a most genuine representative of the new type of conflict introduced by Chekhov into the inventory of drama: the conflict between values that operate neither through deeds nor even through words, but rather through their very existence and representation on stage. It is Masha's very being, not anything specific that she explicitly says, which is at conflict with Natasha's and Andrey's beings.

It is characteristic of Chekhov's structural approach to both thematics and characterisation that neither Andrey, nor Masha, nor the theme of music itself, can be meaningfully discussed in isolation. As I have shown, a principle of *mutual characterisation* is at work here, both as regards characters and as regards themes.[10]

2.1.3. The Lost Key to the Precious Piano[11]

To conclude this discussion of the theme of music in *Three Sisters* at least two more characters have to be considered: Tuzenbakh and, to a lesser extent, Irina. Tuzenbakh was not a son of General Prozorov's, and is therefore free from complexes generated by oppressive education. To him, music fulfils a social-communicative function. His approach to it is light-hearted. It is reasonably inferable from circumstantial evidence, that he had been fortunate in achieving playing-facility and good piano-technique without too much effort. Contrary to Andrey, who plays his violin alone in his room, and to Masha, for whom playing must be meaningful within a system of values, Tuzenbakh plays "for fun" and in order to express glibly the moment's passing sentiments. Therefore, he plays only in public – as background music during meals, dances, etc. In his unproblematic approach, his light touch, his easy mastery of the instrument, he is contrasted not only with the Prozorovs' emotionally loaded approach to music (serving, as it were, as a kind of normal control-group), but also with his own inadequacies and failures in a much more crucial field – in love. Just as he *can* easily make a piano respond to his touch, he *cannot* make Irina reciprocate his love. Thus, music is exposed as a potentially dubious means of communication: even with Tuzenbakh's facility music is a dialogue with a responsive instrument, giving communicative satisfaction mainly to the player himself in the absence of a truly understanding audience. Nowhere in *Three Sisters* does music reach the degree of mutual communication attained by Masha and Vershinin in their quasi-nonsensical "Tram-tam-tam" dialogues (Act III).

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[10] Of course, the characterisation of the theme of music would greatly benefit from its juxtaposition with the structure of comparable themes, but this cannot be done here.

[11] Although all five English translations that I have checked translate lrina's phrase "Dorogoy Royal'" (Act IV) as "expensive (grand) piano", this unanimity does not alter my conviction that the translators were inattentive to a very important subtlety (and in Chekhov the subtle and the important very often typically coincide). There is no doubt in my mind that the adjective "expensive" is extremely inappropriate in this context, and the best near-equivalent I could think of is "precious". "Priceless", more recently suggested, could also do [this sentence was added in the present re-publication].

Irina is intuitively, perhaps subconsciously, but nevertheless keenly aware of this contrast between his conquest of the piano, so easily achieved with a combination of strength and sensitivity, and his defeat in winning her love.[12] Nothing but such an awareness can account for such a seemingly pompous and conceited view of herself, so untypical of her at this stage of her life, as the following simile expresses: "my soul is like a precious piano that is locked up and the key has been lost." As is usual in Chekhov, in order to appreciate these words correctly, one has to consider structures and relationships rather than isolated events, speeches or characters. In this case it is the dynamic development of relationships between Irina and Tuzenbakh which must be considered. Tuzenbakh's wooing of Irina is obstinate, repetitive, persevering; there is little lightness or facility about it. And Irina, more and more despite herself, fails to respond. During the long years of this relationship she has had numerous opportunities to watch his agility as a piano player. The contrast that must have struck her often, perhaps subconsciously, may have made her draw the analogy between herself and the piano *as literal and figurative objects that respond to Tuzenbakh's touch*. Continuing the line of such possibly subliminal thoughts, and prompted by Tuzenbakh lamenting her lack of love for him, Irina smoothly enters the mood that makes an otherwise far-fetched comparison into an organic, natural one.

In Chekhov, more than in most other dramatists, one must consider equally carefully all three relevant factors in the act of communication – the addresser, the addressee and the message – in order to understand any of them. One has to remember that it is Irina that is saying these words; that it is Tuzenbakh who is the only addressee and the only one who hears the message (no one else is present and no one else overhears); and that the message likens a soul awaiting its own true lover to a piano awaiting its own true player. Addressed by Irina to anyone but Tuzenbakh, the simile would be meaningless; and it could not mean more if spoken to Tuzenbakh by anyone but Irina. Only between these two, with their own history, and against the background of the theme of music in *Three Sisters*, can the simile sound as precise, sensitive and intimate as it should, despite the cruelty inherent in its uncompromising exposure of truth. Irina is, as it were, saying to Tuzenbakh: you, whose charms no piano can resist, stand helpless in front of this piano, *that has all the great potential that you ever prayed for*. It is all there, awaiting the magic touch, and you – elsewhere the expert player – do not have the right key (in Russian, as in English – but not with full identity – the word for "key" has purely musical denotations, in addition to the one explicitly employed here, an instrument for locking and unlocking doors, etc.).

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[12] In his later drama Chekhov often shows characters whose strength in one aspect of life throws into bold relief their weakness in another (or vice versa). Thus, for instance, in *The Seagull* all the major characters reflect each other's strengths and weaknesses as artists, lovers and parents through an intricate network of straightforward and oblique analogies between them and between their large variety of traits. In *The Cherry Orchard*, for instance, Lopakhin's strength in business affairs is sharply contrasted with his total helplessness in romantic and matrimonial affairs, as well as with a *somewhat* reversed combination in Ranevskaya and with other variations in Trofimov, Anya and Varya.

Once again Chekhov realises the potentials inherent in music as a nonverbal, non-referential and emotionally expressive communication system. All these attributes are equally applicable to love; therefore the piano-analogy, with its additional highly relevant implication of touch, is so appropriate. Yet Chekhov never allows any allegoric schematicism in such matters: the potential parallelism between music and love is realised neither in Andrey nor in Masha. It is realised, however, in the "precious piano"-simile, when Irina and Tuzenbakh reach the peak of their potential for tender, intimate mutual communication. Thus, there is a realisation of the potentials of the theme of music and of the couple's communication, when Irina speaks to Tuzenbakh *in terms he can understand better than any other person in the play* (see his sympathetic description of Masha's wasted, unrealised potential as an excellent pianist doomed to play for an audience that lacks any understanding). But this moment of truth, candour and communication is actually a confession of non-love: the realisation of certain communicative potentials is instrumental in exposing the most powerful type of unrealisable potential – a love that remains forever a wish, a yearning.

"*If* music be the food of love, play on!" says the Duke in the beginning of Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night*. Tuzenbakh could potentially play on and on, if Solyony did not kill even that potential; but whatever different meanings and functions the theme of music acquires in the play, it never serves as the food of love.[13]

2.2. Music as Sound: Preliminary Remarks

I have quoted above Thomas G. Winner as saying that Chekhov's works (with special reference to *Three Sisters*) abound in "meaningful noises". In my forthcoming book (see note 1) I shall analyse these "noises" in detail, classify them according to sound, structure and function, and relate them to the theme of music, etc. For the moment I would like to make only preliminary remarks about music and sound in the play.

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[13] The Subject of the theme of music has had its exposition here, but has not been exhausted. Thus, for instance, the two playing beggars in Act IV have been omitted from the discussion, because they are marginal in relation to the main aspects of the theme. More central is Natasha's playing *The Virgin's Prayer* for Protopopov, which is heard in Act IV and signifies the deterioration of the family's piano together with the rest of the house: Natasha has found the key to the literal precious piano of the family ...

I would also like to mention the end of Act II in *Uncle Vanya*, where the stifling presence of Professor Serebryakov is so keenly felt in his objection to Yelena's wish to communicate through music. Compare this to Kulygin's reflecting his Headmaster's Voice in doubting whether it is proper for Masha to take part in a concert.

Not all music is sound and not all sound is music in *Three Sisters*. Just as Irina's "precious piano" and Masha's refraining from playing are "music without sound", so the ringing of fire bells, Solyony's "tsip tsip" and the noises of Protopopov's approaching *Troika* are "sound without music". Music is multifunctional, as we have seen, and often works simultaneously as sound and as theme; as such it should be analysed under both headings. As sound, however, it is inseparable from other sounds in comprising the nonverbal sound-texture of the play.

Without analysing any specific example I would like to draw attention here only to one principle that is very typical of Chekhov's technique of employing music, sound *and* other nonverbal elements in his plays: his way of linking the verbal and the nonverbal. As a general tendency, he introduces a sound (or some other nonverbal elements) and gives it an explicit verbal interpretation, either immediately or somewhat later. Once the nonverbal element has acquired its verbally determined meaning, it can reappear in various contexts and combinations, carrying within it the acquired meaning and making it interact with the new textual environment. Thus, for instance, Andrey's violin-playing is heard from backstage in Act I before his first appearance on the stage; then Masha interprets the sound, ascribing it to her brother. Little by little we learn what this playing signifies, until the very sound of violin, or reference to it, immediately carries the entire thematic weight as a kind of shorthand. Something similar happens with the nurse-maid's lullaby-singing in Act II, though in reverse order. First, Natasha declares (to Andrey) her intention not to admit the masked guests, because of Bobik's bad health. Later, when the nurse-maid's lullaby is heard backstage, it can already be interpreted by the audience as representing the baby's presence, which under the circumstances is an extension of Natasha's. It can also imply calling Natasha's bluff as a devoted mother: while she uses the baby as an excuse to drive people out (of their rooms as inhabitants, or of the house as guests) it is the nurse, rather than she, who actually looks after the child. These meanings are not established as yet, and at best they work vaguely and subliminally in the audience's consciousness; but the groundwork for these interpretations has been laid as it can only be done by nonverbal means. Little by little, once again, the interpretation gathers momentum. When the nurse-maid's song is heard again[14] at the end of the Act, it adds without words a sharp ironic dimension: when Natasha has made the most out of Bobik's illness – cancelling the party and driving Irina out of her room – she can go out with her lover Protopopov, leaving the care of the baby to the maid, whose song serves as a clear reminder of what the baby is really good for in Natasha's mind.

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[14] Chekhov does not specify when the song should stop, and this leaves room for the director's interpretation. The song can fade in and out, gradually or abruptly, several times without contradicting the playwright's instructions.

This sophisticated "shorthand" use of nonverbal elements, notably music and other sounds, reinforced by verbal boosters, is one of Chekhov's contributions to modern drama.

2.3. Music as Structural Model

One of the basic and obvious differences between the typical ways that textures of music (in its western, tonal version) and language (and, hence, of literature) can be organised is that verbal material must be arranged in a successive, linear way if it is to be processed by addressees in an intelligible manner, whereas in music two or more melodic lines can be processed concurrently *and intelligibly*. Chekhov is keenly aware of this difference between verbal and nonverbal materials as components of the complex and heterogeneous medium of drama (here music is a model for several nonverbal elements of theatre, inscribed in the dramatic text).

In this respect, once again, Chekhov can be sharply and equally distinguished from his traditional (realistic and pre-realistic) predecessors and from his "absurd" successors. Unlike the former, he explores new frontiers in the previously undiscovered-country of dramatic-theatrical simultaneity; unlike the latter, he refrains from allowing simultaneity to pervade all the strata and components of the dramatic whole, restricting it to nonverbal material only.

This can be rephrased in potential-and-realisation terminology; but, unlike my discussion in Section 1 above, I am referring here to the realisation by authors of potentials inherent in the dramatic-theatrical medium, rather than to the realisation of potentials inherent in individuals and/or in central phenomena in human life. In this context, then, Chekhov can be contrasted with other dramatists as follows: while pre-Chekhovian drama did not realise, indeed was hardly aware of, certain potentials of the dramatic medium, Chekhov was one of the leading pioneers in discovering and realising them, whereas in the "absurd" one can find cases of *over-realisation of "non potentials",* of stretching the material beyond its means and possibilities.

Specifically, I am referring to the fact that Chekhovian dramatic simultaneity (or "polyphony"), which will presently be demonstrated, is characterised by a careful discrimination in the treatment of the diverse components of the dramatic medium. *Never* does he allow real verbal simultaneity (i.e., the actual sounding of two or more verbal texts on stage at the same time) to occur; but he does develop sophisticated techniques of *quasi*-simultaneous organisation of verbal messages, and of *real* simultaneous presentation of nonverbal elements among themselves, and of nonverbal elements with verbal ones. The potential possibility of projecting simultaneous stimuli, peculiar to drama (being a score for theatre) and in opposition to narrative and poetry, has always been there to be realised; and, in fact, it was realised in theatrical *performance* long before Chekhov's time. But in the non-comic *written* drama, for reasons that cannot be discussed here, little had been done in that direction before Chekhov. On the other hand, in the "absurd" (e.g., in Beckett's *Play*) verbal simultaneity is not just simulated, but sometimes really effected, with the inevitable and deliberately calculated result of the total, or at least partial, unintelligibility of the spoken text(s) in front of an audience of spectators/listeners. This I have described as "over-realising a non-potential": it is beyond the potential of verbal-semantic lines to be processed simultaneously.[15]

Such real verbal simultaneity looks at first like musical polyphony; but this is a superficial and misleading analogy, because it is semiotically wrong to equate an intelligible complex with an unintelligible one on the sole basis of sensory similarity (simultaneous stimuli). Chekhov's quasi, or simulated, "polyphony" is much more comparable to musical polyphony, since they share a broad and essential common denominator of *processable and intelligible simultaneity*, which accounts for their comparability in terms of their semiotic function within their respective systems.

Chekhov is rightly described as the first great master of non-comic lack of communication between characters on stage,[16] but his text never risks losing communicative contact with the audience. Unlike most pre-Chekhovian drama, he shows a great deal of broken communication, of discontinuous dialogue, of total misunderstandings, etc., *among his characters*; unlike the "absurd", however, he never lets go of the communicability of the text as such *with the audience*. In other words, in Chekhov *communication can be poor or absent on the fictional plane, i.e., on the "reconstructed level" of events and characters,*[17] *but not on the rhetorical plane, i.e., between author-text-audience*.

Space does not permit me to analyse a number of scenes where Chekhovian simultaneity is put to work. Such an analysis must be quite lengthy, carefully weighing numerous subtle details and relationships. Rather, I shall briefly analyse just one of these scenes, and not the most complex one at that, mention some others, and advise the reader to read them bearing in mind what has just been said. Then, going back from text to analysis, one can test the validity of what has been said in the light of those scenes.

I shall first address myself to the very beginning of *Three Sisters*. There is a line of dialogue between Ol'ga and Irina (which, in its turn, consists of their two respective sub-lines), to which Masha's whistling is added (as a token of half-present absence). Ol'ga refers to this whistling explicitly (p. 200),[18] thereby temporarily connecting the two lines (of talking and of whistling). Then there is the line of the three officers (Chebutykin, Tuzenbakh and Solyony), consisting in its turn of three separate sub-lines, interrelated in mutual misunderstanding and lack of communication. The carefully selected comments that reach the audience from their broken conversation (of course, in a work of fiction, this "selection" is the entire conversation; however, the effect is one of "present absence" of that eternal nothing that has, supposedly, been withheld from the audience) have a direct bearing on the sisters" conversation, unwittingly negating and laughing at the Moscow dream, as it were. However, this integration between the two lines takes place only on the rhetorical plane (Chekhov "talking to us behind his characters' backs"), while on the fictional plane the two conversations are distinct and reflect complete ignorance on the part of the participants in each of them of the very existence of the other conversation. Thus a complex semantic load is generated by the creation of typically verbal-dramatic "polyphony": two (or, actually, more) lines that are fictionally simultaneous intersect and interrupt each other to *simulate* real simultaneity, but at any given moment only one of them is actually uttered. The verbal text as such, on stage and page alike, is successive and linear.

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[15] This statement may require some qualification and refinement. In actual theatrical performance, the nature, degree, distribution, balance, and actual existence of unintelligibly uttered verbal material are to a considerable extent, and quite inevitably, left to the discretion of the performers — i.e., the director and the actors. They can, if they wish, carefully "orchestrate" stresses and pauses; regulate tempo and *pace* of verbal delivery; manipulate spectators' expectations etc. — so as to foreground and/or background elements that enhance or impair intelligibility, as the case may be. However, as far as the written dramatic text *qua* score of theatrical potentialities is concerned, the very authorial instruction (stage-direction) ordering verbal simultaneity amounts to encouraging the performers to make each verbal message into a noise-screen impairing the potential intelligibility of the other(s).

[16] He is also a master of communication and understanding among characters, *in certain cases*. The subject deserves separate treatment.

[17] See Hrushovski, *Segmentation and Motivation*, p.5.

Now the semantic load is further charged by the *truly* simultaneous treatment of *nonverbal* material: visual (e.g., the significant colours of the sisters' dresses, the equally significant particulars of architecture and furniture required by the stage directions), auditory (e.g., Masha's whistling) and gesticular (e.g., the static or dynamic bodily postures of the characters required, too, by the stage directions). These nonverbal, but semanticised, presences interact with the verbal quasi-polyphony through their continuous, truly simultaneous existence. Subsequently, the scene develops in a genuinely music-like patterning by introducing the characters from backstage *one by one*, moving them into the front room to join the mainstream conversation, each contributing his own *motif* before joining the others in some sort of unified dialogue (in a way, turning quasi-heterophony into quasi-polyphony). One can describe this process as "Haydn-*Farewell-Symphony* in reverse", as a "reunion symphony", or as an exposition of multi-thematic textures (see pp. 200-201, the entrances of Tuzenbakh, Solyony and Chebutykin). This is music-like organisational technique *par excellence*, treating literary thematic material, rather than verbal sound material, in a manner analogous to polyphonic treatment of musical thematics. Far more complex are the confession-scenes in Act III (with Natasha's speechless appearance and disappearance contrasting the sisters' own polyphony on p. 246), and, above all, the final tableau of the entire play. Here diverse stimuli, whose very simultaneous heterogeneity is specifically dramatic, are employed concurrently: verbal ones (the sisters' craving and quest for meaning in Ol'ga's "If Only We Knew", simultaneously interwoven with Chebutykin's nihilistic nonsense refrains); auditory ones

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[18] Page reference are made to *Chekhov: Five Major Plays*, translated by Ronald Hingley (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977).

(the military band playing) and visual-gestural ones (Andrey pushing the baby-pram and Kulygin, smiling cheerfully, in the background). Each of these is heavily loaded semantically, and all are projected at the audience after their respective meanings have been established and circumscribed well in advance throughout the play. In this last scene they interact and modify each other reciprocally, producing the final, highly condensed and carefully balanced complex of meanings with which the audience is supposed to depart from the play and to bear in mind.

It is beyond the scope of the present discussion to spell out the detailed thematic interpretation of this scene. Suffice it to say in this context, that only the use of music-like techniques applied to verbal and nonverbal material, each treated according to its "natural" characteristics, can produce so complex and controlled an effect with such seemingly simple and naturally-flowing means.

For Chekhov the dramatist music serves as a model for structuring his "world", not only his text. It is an active, though perhaps partly subconscious, "modelling system", manifest not only in textual patterning, but also in thematic structuration and in the way characters are juxtaposed with each other, in partial contrast and/or harmony. Themes, meanings and characters are made to relate to each other, as well as to semanticised nonverbal components of the text, in manners comparable to the ways melodic lines in counterpoint may relate to each other. No constituent element – be it a scene, a theme, a character – can be truly defined and delineated unless and until it has been described in terms of the relationships that obtain between it and its relevant highly semanticised structural network(s). Only these relationships, rather than their constituent elements, can perform the function of referring to internal or external Fields of Reference, in the sense of Hrushovski. In other words, Chekhov conceives of his themes and characters "polyphonically": thematic, psychological, ideological (etc.) networks are heavily and *mutually* interdependent. Just as "total independence" of a melodic line in a piece of Renaissance polyphony (e.g., Palestrina), or even in certain passages by Bach,[19] is a mirage, since the polyphonic whole makes interdependence misleadingly sound like a coincidence of independences, so does a Chekhov character or theme derive *its very identity and significance* from the process of mutual reinforcement between it and other themes, characters and relationships, etc., in the text.

It must be stressed, however, that Chekhov differs from others in this respect in terms of degree only: a Shakespearean theme or character, for instance, is also defined better and more fully when its structural connections (analogical, metonymical, contrastive, etc.) have been considered; but its Chekhovian counterpart has less "thematic backbone" in its own right: just enough to provide support for other themes and characters in return for their support for it. The entire grand design of Chekhovian dramatic architecture is built on the firm structure of numerous fragile elements lending each other indispensable support through a dense thicket of subtle channels.

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[19] In a forthcoming study I shall demonstrate in what ways, structurally, Chekhov's polyphony is more analogous to Palestrina's than to Bach's.

Author's Note: This 1984 promise was fulfilled in my book (see *Min-Ad Editor's comment* to Note 1 above), pp. 285-6.

Examples are numerous and cannot be discussed here. Suffice it to say that it is far more essential and indispensable to speak of, e.g., *any* of the sisters and Andrey with constant reference to *all* of the others (and to extra-family characters), and to speak of music in *Three Sisters* with reference to, e.g., work, love, education, etc., than it is to speak of Lear with reference to Gloucester, for instance. This is simply because Lear has enough in him without reference to Gloucester (this argument requires further elaboration, to be carried out elsewhere).

To conclude: the coincidence of the thematic, auditory and structural presences of music in *Three Sisters* is not an *a priori* necessity: world drama and literature abound in examples of just one or two of these. But, with hindsight, this coincidence makes the play – far more than "jingling poems" like Poe's "The Raven", for instance – into one of the most powerfully-musical works of verbal art ever written. This is why the subtle and intricate subject of music in *Three Sisters* – transcending as it does the limits of this specific masterpiece and bearing on the problem of the frontiers and potentialities of "musicality" in literature in general – so richly deserves further and more penetrating study.

About the Author

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