

“And then they began to sing.” Reflections on Tolstoy and Music¹

Stephen Halliwell

University of St Andrews

Ich fühl's und kann's nicht versteh'n,
kann's nicht behalten,
doch auch nicht vergessen:
und faß' ich es ganz, kann ich's nicht messen!
(Wagner, *Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg*, Act II)

Tolstoy and the Problem of Emotion in Music

“Problems of the theory of art worry me incessantly.” Not many people, I think, can ever have had reason to express quite such a sentiment as that. But then not many people have ever lived life in quite the way that Lev Nicolaevich Tolstoy did. The confession I have quoted – which expresses no merely intellectual puzzlement but a gnawing uncertainty and moral anxiety – was written by the sixty-five-year-old Tolstoy in a letter to his daughter Tanya (Tatiana) on 12th March 1894 (see Christian 1978, II 502–503).² Tolstoy was at this date reading widely in the history of aesthetics and grappling with questions which two years later would prompt him to start writing *What is Art?*, which was eventually published in two instalments in 1897–1898. But the incessant worries about the theory of art which he mentioned in that letter were, like everything else which mattered to him, not the result only of reading and abstract reflection but of his own uneasy encounters with art. In addition to telling Tanya that he had been “tormented” (that same note of moral anxiety) by news of a recent visit she had made to the Louvre (Tanya was at this

1 I am grateful for the discussion which the original script of this paper received in Helsinki in June 2009. I would also like to thank Margaret-Anne Hutton for comments on the penultimate version.

2 The letter is technically written to both Tanya and her brother Lyova, but most of the paragraph from which I quote in the text is addressed directly to Tanya.

time living in Paris with her sick brother Lyova), Tolstoy reports an incident which had happened to him just the day before.

He was attending a party at the Moscow house of the Behrs, his wife's family, and had just listened to a performance of a string quartet by Tchaikovsky, a composer for whose music he had once had some admiration but with whom his relations had long ago soured.³ Tolstoy tells Tanya that the quartet was "rubbishy", and it was evidently to inflict his trenchant view of the work on the student cellist of the ensemble that he struck up a conversation with this young man. Tolstoy continues his account as follows:

And then they began to sing. So as not to disturb the singing, we went into another room at the back, and I was maintaining heatedly to him that modern music had taken the wrong road, when suddenly something interrupted my thoughts, took a hold of me, drew me towards it and demanded obedience.

The thing which demanded Tolstoy's "obedience" was the sound, coming through the walls from the other room, of an extract from Mozart's *Don Giovanni*. "They had started", he explains, "to sing...the duet *Là ci darem la mano*. I stopped talking and began to listen and rejoice and smile at something."⁴

This letter provides a striking testimony to the intense susceptibility to music which continued to manifest itself in Tolstoy's personality even when he had developed a strongly moralistic set of reasons for trying to combat its hold over him. "What a dreadful power it has!", his letter to Tanya exclaims. "It's just the same with your Louvre", he adds, making a direct connection with Tanya's own activities in Paris. Tolstoy then draws an analogy which confirms, if confirmation were needed, just how troubled and uncertain he felt about the power of art.

Just as people were put to death for witchcraft, i.e. for a mysterious evil influence, and were praised and glorified for prayer, a mysterious good influence, so it should be with art too. It's no joking matter, but a terrible power. But it appears that people only want the bad influence.

What Tolstoy does not spell out to Tanya is whether he takes as a good or bad influence an operatic duet in which a ruthless seducer is calculatingly luring a young bride-to-be into a sexual trap. His description of "rejoicing" and, more enigmatically, "smiling" while listening to the music seems to imply a positive

3 See Garden 1974, with Christian 1978, I 301–302 for Tolstoy's only letter to the composer.

4 There is a reference to the same duet in Act I Scene 1 of *The Light Shines in Darkness* (unfinished, started 1896). It is possible also to detect hints of the duet in the opera chapter of *War and Peace*, where the male lover "fingers the hand" of the girl he is wooing: I intend to discuss this and other features of this scene in a separate article. For Tolstoy's high regard for *Don Giovanni*, see his son's testimony in Tolstoy (S.) 1926, 517, 604, with Goldenweizer 1969, 105. Saylor 1995–1996 explicates the reference to *Don Giovanni* in Oblonsky's dream at the very start of *Anna Karenina*.

pleasure. But Tolstoy's double reference to the "dreadful" and "terrible" power of music/art (language which echoes, as we shall see later, the views of his character Pozdnyshev in *The Kreutzer Sonata*) might be thought to hint otherwise. Since what he calls the good and bad influences share a "mysterious" nature, we might well wonder whether Tolstoy himself felt confident that he could tell the difference between them. Is *Là ci darem la mano* "witchcraft" or "prayer"?

It would be only too easy on the basis of this letter (including the fleeting impression that a death sentence is being recommended for "evil" artists) to convict Tolstoy of a grotesque imbalance in some of his thinking about art, not least about music. But it is the almost pathological intensity and turbulence of Tolstoy's feelings on this subject, feelings compounded of attraction and resistance, which make him so intriguing for the purpose for which I want to use him here, namely as a test case for some reflections on the place of emotion in (experiences of) music. Those feelings are all the more worth probing because of the way in which they form connections between the autobiographical and the creative sides of Tolstoy's existence. Music was always of deep concern, both positive and negative, to Tolstoy, and a great deal is known about his responses to it at various stages of his life – both from his own testimony (in diaries, letters and the treatise *What is Art?*), and also from the evidence of others, not least his wife Sophia, who was herself highly sensitive to music and about whom I shall have a little more to say later on. Precisely because of its great importance to him, the experience of music influenced Tolstoy in more than one respect as a creative artist. And it is some of the tangled threads connecting his feelings about music with his self-reflections (as well as some of his practices) as a writer which I want to examine here.

The core of my argument is that the nature of musical emotion (emotion "in" and/or induced by music) was always a problem for Tolstoy, but that it grew over the course of time from being a problem he could accept and assimilate into a larger sense of the inexhaustible capacities of art (a sense he maintained up to the later 1870s at least) into one which became for him a source of constant moral anxiety – an anxiety intrinsically tied to his own susceptibility to music. When, therefore, his attitudes to music changed in his later decades – his attitudes to music in general but also to specific kinds and works of music – this inevitably involved Tolstoy in a struggle with part of himself, a struggle which, as the testimony of those who knew him shows, was never properly resolved.⁵ This struggle was all the more relentless because music had always represented for Tolstoy the art which above all others defied or exceeded discursive analysis. In developing the uncompromisingly moralistic aesthetic that found its most sustained statement in *What is Art?*, Tolstoy needed, as he tells us himself, to repudiate much that he had once valued. And

⁵ Cf. the telling remarks of Rischin 1989, 12 and 54, that music was for Tolstoy "a way of experiencing the quandary of himself" and that his attacks on Beethoven and others were a failed "exorcism" of the competing claims of "artist" and "didact" in himself.

that meant, more than anything else, trying to repudiate the power of music to command, in the terms of that letter to Tanya, the “obedience” of his soul.

Memory, Imagination and the Nature of Emotional “Infection”

One way of starting to chart the psychological trajectory which Tolstoy’s views followed in this area is to turn to his diary entry for the 29th November 1851, when he was only 23. Tolstoy is here attempting to work out his own personal grasp of the well established question of the affinities and the differences between major art-forms. This is the core of what he has to say:

Painting affects the power to imagine nature, and its province is space. Music affects the power to imagine your feelings, and its province is harmony and time. Poetry affects the power to imagine both the one and the other, i.e. reality, or the relations of our feelings towards nature. Dances are a transitional stage between painting and music. Songs – between music and poetry. Why did the ancients call music imitative?... Why does music affect us like memory?... [W]hy music is an imitation of our feelings, and what affinity there is between each change of sound and a particular feeling it’s impossible to say... Music even has the advantage over poetry that the imitation of feelings by music is more absolute than their imitation by poetry, but it does not have that clarity which constitutes the property of poetry. (Christian 1985, I 39–40).

Although it would be misguided to try to extract a complete aesthetic from these notes, three points of interest strike me as salient here. One is that Tolstoy seems to take music not simply to arouse or cause emotions but to activate or involve the imagination of emotion. When, almost half a century later, he came to codify his “infection” theory of artistic expression in *What is Art?*, he made allowance for the process of imagining or, rather, reimagining feeling as part of the creative process.⁶ But he did not do the same for the receiver’s side of the equation: the effect of art, according to the treatise, is always to make the hearer or viewer actually experience the emotions which the artist has expressed in his work. Yet in this early diary entry the significance of receptive imagination on the part of the audience of art does seem to be acknowledged. The analogy with painting reinforces the point (as does the ancient vocabulary of “imitation” or mimesis which Tolstoy toys with here).⁷ Painting relies on the same visual capacities as are involved in looking at nature; but nature as depicted in painting is an imaginary or virtual object. Likewise, it might be thought, music stimulates affective capacities

⁶ Tolstoy 1930, e.g. 122 (“if a man feels, or imagines to himself, feelings...”), 123 (“To evoke in oneself a feeling...”).

⁷ For reasons too complex to rehearse here, my own view is that the Greek vocabulary of mimesis, where both music and other artforms are concerned, is better not translated as “imitation” or its equivalent in other modern languages: Halliwell 2002, especially ch. 8 on music.

which are also involved in first-order emotional responses to the world, but the affective “content” that plays a part in the musical experience appears, in Tolstoy’s phrase, to be matter of imagined feelings. Such distinctions, among others, have of course also figured in modern philosophical debates over the status of musical “emotion”.⁸ My immediate aim is not to address such issues in their own right but to raise the question of how much difference it would have made to Tolstoy’s thinking about music if he had continued to give some weight to the role of imagination, as opposed to “raw” emotion, in musical experience. As it is – and on account, one can hardly doubt, of his own tendency to have acutely emotional reactions to music – his normal later supposition, as we shall see, is that music does not so much affect the power to imagine one’s feelings as *excite* those feelings with direct, even physiological immediacy.

The second point of interest in this early diary entry is the reference to memory: “why does music affect us like memory?” This might be interpreted in more than one way: perhaps as comparing the effect of musical expression to the involuntary force, the spontaneous welling up, of certain kinds of memory; or perhaps (also) as comparing it to something like a clustering of feelings around an associative core.⁹ (Let me just mention in passing, *à propos* both those things, that what we think of as Proustian memory is precisely anticipated by Tolstoy himself in chapter 10 of *The Death of Ivan Ilyich*.) It is certainly impossible to avoid the inference that Tolstoy took the experience of music to be capable of carrying with it highly charged memories. We know that he had given this subject thought on other occasions. A diary entry from a few months earlier in 1851, for instance, describes how he had sat near an open window in the Caucasus village where he was at this date serving as an army volunteer and had sung with great vigour and animation a gipsy song which he had learnt from a girl, Katya, with whom he enjoyed an amorous liaison. “One characteristic feature of a thing”, he writes there, “recreates for us many memories of occasions connected with that feature”; and he takes something about the style and idiom of gipsy songs to explain the vividness of the memories they bring back for him.¹⁰

The final point of interest I want to highlight in the November 1851 diary entry is the combination of intensity with lack of clarity which Tolstoy finds in music’s relationship to feeling. This in itself, needless to say, is the kind of observation

8 Jerrold Levinson is one contemporary philosopher who takes music to involve a kind of imagined emotion: e.g. Levinson 2006, 95, 107. Note also Levinson’s allowance for music to work emotionally on memory, either recalling or reviving previous emotional experiences: Levinson 1990, 314 n. 9.

9 There is a much later diary entry, 21st August 1900, which speaks of memory as “unit[ing] various faces, objects and feelings into one”, before adding: “it’s this that is the subject of art. That’s very important. I must clarify it.” Christian 1985, II 480.

10 Diary for 10th August 1851: Christian 1985, I 35. Cf. also the extract from a draft of *Boyhood and Youth* cited in his son’s memoir, Tolstoy (S.) 1926, 516–517, though there Tolstoy separates memory from imagination.

on music which many others have made. But in the course of time it was to assume special significance in Tolstoy's thinking. It was to lead him eventually to a repudiation of all music whose emotional meaning he found unclear or indefinite, and to a corresponding insistence that the only music which can count as authentic, good art is music whose emotional point is simple and unequivocal.

One particular statement of that later Tolstoyan position makes a fruitful text for comparison, in several respects, with the November 1851 diary entry. The passage in question, from chapter 14 of *What is Art?*, hinges around a pair of contrasting musical experiences on a single day in June 1897. It begins as follows:

A few days ago I was returning home from a walk feeling depressed, as sometimes happens. On nearing the house I heard the loud singing of a large choir of peasant women. They were welcoming my daughter, celebrating her return home after her marriage. In this singing, with its cries and clanging of scythes, such a definite feeling of joy, cheerfulness, and energy, was expressed, that without noticing how it infected me I continued my way towards the house in a better mood and reached home smiling and quite in good spirits. (Tolstoy 1930, 221).¹¹

That same evening, a visiting musician (who was in fact Sergei Taneev, with whom Sophia developed a close friendship which caused Tolstoy pangs of jealousy) played Beethoven's piano sonata op. 101, a work which Tolstoy condemns as an example of the "shapeless improvisations" (elsewhere he even calls them the "ravings") of Beethoven's late period. After the performance Tolstoy became locked in argument with those who admired the piece (including, we can assume, his own wife). He drew for them, as he does for his readers, a sharp contrast between the sonata and the women's song he had heard earlier in the day: "the song of the peasant women was real art transmitting a definite and strong feeling, while the 101st [*sic*] sonata of Beethoven was only an unsuccessful attempt at art containing no definite feeling and therefore not infectious" (Tolstoy 1930, 223).¹²

If all that confronted us here was the difference between Tolstoy's positive, uplifted response to the peasant song and his cold, unmoved reaction to the Beethoven sonata, the passage would be of modest interest. But there are further layers to Tolstoy's account, layers which conceal some cracks in the foundations of his aesthetic. Tolstoy is anxious to avoid any imputation that he is merely incapable of appreciating Beethoven's extraordinarily original late works – that his musical

¹¹ We can date the event by the reference to the marriage of Tolstoy's daughter (Maria or Masha): the wedding was on June 2nd 1897, her return home on June 3rd. Cf. Golinenko 1985, 192.

¹² Sophia records a similar tirade a few weeks later: "when he launches into these denunciations he always becomes so irritable that I cannot bear to listen and have to leave the room" (July 5th 1897: Golinenko 1985, 211). We know that Sophia herself admired Beethoven's genius without qualification: see e.g. *ibid.* 259, 260, 264 (diary entries for Nov. 11th, 13th, 27th 1897), with 290 (Feb. 12th 1898) for the "outrage" that Sophia felt over the condemnation of Beethoven in *What is Art?* She also felt a positive attraction, unlike her husband, to musical complexity: see e.g. her diary for Dec. 6th 1898 (Golinenko 1985, 359). On Tolstoy's and his wife's arguments over music, cf. my text below.

sensibility is simple and limited (an inference which one modern musicologist has actually drawn about him, mistakenly I think).¹³ He tries to preempt any judgement to that effect by telling us that “whatever other people understand of that sonata and of other productions of Beethoven’s later period, I, being very susceptible to music, understand equally”. This is peculiar in three ways: first, because it seems to conflate susceptibility with understanding; secondly, because it appears not to exclude the possibility of at least partial understanding of Beethoven’s work, even though the argument of *What is Art?* emphatically asserts that such music is intrinsically unintelligible; thirdly, because it immediately prompts the question why, if Tolstoy was both susceptible to and (partially) comprehending of Beethoven’s late works, the sonata failed (at least partially) to “infect” him. Tolstoy implicitly offers an answer to that question, but it is an answer which might be thought only to intensify the force of the question. For a long time, he explains, he had, as he puts it, “attuned” himself “to delight in those shapeless improvizations”, but he had only “to consider the question of art seriously” and to compare his impressions of late Beethoven with those he received from certain other kinds of music – including some of the works of Bach, Haydn, Mozart, and Chopin, but above all various traditions of folk-song – in order to destroy what he calls “the obscure, almost unhealthy, excitement from Beethoven’s later pieces which I had artificially evoked in myself” (Tolstoy 1930, 222).

This passage throws a particularly personal light on some of the problems involved in the infection aesthetic of *What is Art?*, as well as on the psychologically knotted issues at stake in Tolstoy’s self-scrutiny of his relationship to music.¹⁴ According to the infection theory expounded in this book, no hearer of an authentic musical work of art can fail to be infected, i.e. emotionally activated, by it; infection is a contagion of artistically embodied feeling which operates *universally*, its power wholly independent of cultural difference. Equally, no inauthentic, “counterfeit” art (which is what Tolstoy holds Beethoven’s late works to be) can infect anyone at all, since such a work by definition has not been created out of genuine feeling and therefore has nothing to communicate. What, then, was Tolstoy previously doing in “attuning” himself to “delight” in late Beethoven? What was the “excitement” he derived from such experiences? Or what was it he had once thought he “understood” in something like op. 101?

13 Cf. Garden 1974, 307: “Tolstoy’s knowledge of music was superficial, and though he enjoyed it and played the piano in his young days, he later was to reject anything beyond the comprehension of the *muzhik*”. The first part of this judgement misleadingly simplifies the details and psychology of Tolstoy’s evolving relationship to music.

14 No wonder that Sophia, who laboriously copied out draft after draft of the treatise for her husband, as with almost all his other works, should have confided to her diary that much of *What is Art?* was “unjustified, paradoxical, and provocative”: Golinenko 1985, 235 (28th August 1897). Cf. Sophia’s critique of Tolstoy’s inconsistent attitudes to music: *ibid.* 372 (Jan. 30th 1899).

Tolstoy's own answer is that in all those respects he had himself succumbed to and participated in a wholesale process of cultural perversion. This was a process which, on a certain level, had started in the Renaissance (which Tolstoy took to be something more like the beginning of true art's slow death than its "rebirth") and had reached a nadir of decadence in the nineteenth century itself. Under the immense pressure of social exclusiveness, this process had produced entire traditions of counterfeit art – art which might be superficially striking and "interesting" in its effects, but which at its core was emotionally hollow. Tolstoy had described in chapter 11 what this might mean in the case of music in particular.

The substitution of effect for aesthetic feeling is particularly noticeable in musical art – that art which by its nature has an immediate physiological action on the nerves. Instead of transmitting by means of a melody the feelings he has experienced, a composer of the new school accumulates and complicates sounds, and by now strengthening, now weakening them, he produces on the audience a physiological effect of a kind that can be measured by an apparatus invented for that purpose. (Tolstoy 1930, 188).¹⁵

In previously enjoying late Beethoven, therefore, Tolstoy had been living – literally – on his nerves: that is "the obscure, almost unhealthy, excitement" he refers to in chapter 14 and which other sources for his typically intense reactions to music bear out. Maurice Kuez, a tutor to one of the Tolstoy's grandchildren, recorded in a memoir how in his later years Tolstoy would insist that the tears which music could still elicit from him were meaningless: "it's nerves, nothing but nerves", he would say (quoted in Troyat 1970, 838).¹⁶

The fundamental difficulty with all of this is, of course, its circularity. If all music has a "physiological action on the nerves", how can one tell whether the affective experience of a piece of music is authentic "infection", i.e. the transmission of something the composer had supposedly felt, or a merely neuro-physiological stimulus? The only criterion Tolstoy can propose is universality, the necessary emotional accessibility of true art to everyone, regardless of social status, education, or cultural background. "To say that a work of art is good but incomprehensible to the majority of men", as chapter 10 puts it, "is the same as saying of some kind of food that it is very good but most people can't eat it" (Tolstoy 1930, 176). But not only is such universality an *a priori* and untested assertion on Tolstoy's part (as

15 By the "new school" Tolstoy means practically everything from late Beethoven onwards. *À propos* the idea of music's nervous excitation, note that in ch. 5 of the treatise Tolstoy cites (only to discard) a "physiological-evolutionary" definition which derives art from sexual desire and play and takes it to be accompanied by "a pleasurable excitement of the nervous system" (ibid. 119).

16 For examples of Tolstoy's weeping in response to music, even late in life, see e.g. Sophia's diary for 3rd August 1907 (Golinenko 1985, 626), referring to Beethoven's Appassionata sonata; and Tolstoy's own diary for 1st May 1909 (Christian 1985, II 611; cf. Sophia's diary for 30th April 1909, Golinenko 1985, 639, for the music performed on this occasion).

well as one which we know that he privately found it hard to sustain);¹⁷ it is one which he has to shore up by moving round in a closed circle of reasoning. Thus any art which Tolstoy thinks bad but which seems to transmit strong feelings to others must be appealing to utterly *perverted* tastes: this is the case, for instance, with Wagner's operas, which Tolstoy was disgusted to observe "hypnotising" and "enrapturing" some people. (I shall say a little bit more about this subject shortly.) Equally, if any good art fails to infect *everyone*, this can only be so with those who have had their best feelings "atrophied" by the acquisition of an artificial, decadent liking for counterfeit art.

It is somewhat to Tolstoy's credit that he does not use this logic simply to insist on his own musical preferences. As we have seen, he is prepared to turn it against himself as well, employing it to criticise the spiritual failings of his own former self. Indeed, I suggest that it is in part the energy unleashed by Tolstoy's zealous attempts at self-reform, including his repudiation of things about music that had once meant something to him, which produces the scathing vehemence of his critique of bad, decadent art in his treatise. The younger Tolstoy, as we saw earlier, was puzzled about the sources of music's capacity to stimulate the imagination of feeling, but he was prepared to accept a lack of discursive clarity in music as the price of the intensity of feeling it might carry with it. The older Tolstoy wants to resist such indefinite forms of experience at all costs.

***The Kreutzer Sonata* and the Enigmatic Influences of Music**

I would like at this point to introduce a kind of parallel test case from Tolstoy's creative work, one of the most problematic treatments of music anywhere in his *oeuvre*. This is the description of the soirée in chapter 23 of *The Kreutzer Sonata* at which Pozdnyshev listens to his wife accompanying on the piano the violinist Trukhachevski, whose entry into their life has started to cause Pozdnyshev almost unbearable jealousy and will eventually lead him to murder his wife. This chapter (which was, significantly, a late addition to the story; see Knapp 1991, 31) lends itself all the more readily to my purposes because of its context within a work which has an undeniable autobiographical underpinning in Tolstoy's own views, not least his views on marriage and on relations between the sexes. My point here, even so, is not to set up a simple, direct equation in all respects between author and character,

17 Tolstoy saw for himself the difficulty of sustaining the "infective universality of good art" thesis even while he was writing *What is Art*: see his diary for 28th May 1896, "Any work of art is only a work of art when it's comprehensible – I don't say to everyone, but to people on a certain level of education" (Christian 1985, II 427). But if he had admitted this modification into his arguments, the central thesis of the book would have collapsed. Note his wife's scepticism: "One has only to ask *who* is supposed to be 'infected' for his entire argument to be destroyed", diary for June 15th 1897 (Golinenko 1985, 200).

but to attend to how Tolstoy converts some of his perceptions of, and perplexities about, music into the extraordinarily overwrought sensibility of Pozdnyshev.

The first thing I want to draw attention to in Pozdnyshev's account of the soirée is the special quality of his act of memory itself as he thinks back to the point at which his wife and Trukhachevski prepared to play. In the way Pozdnyshev presents this fact we can see an expression of something like the complementary reverse of the thought which Tolstoy had encapsulated in the question posed in that 1851 diary entry ("Why does music affect us like memory?"). In contrast to the dullness of the dinner, which he passes over without detail, the approach of the performance makes Pozdnyshev exclaim, "Oh, how I remember every detail of that evening!"; and when he reaches the start of the music itself, he has to pause and collect himself, unable at first to continue because of the potency of his recollections (Tolstoy 1940, 185). Since those recollections are of being overwhelmed at the time by a flood of mixed feelings in response to the music, Tolstoy makes his protagonist dramatise a kind of reciprocal intensity between the musical experience and its recall.¹⁸ Later in the account, in fact, Pozdnyshev will refer to the feelings which the music had aroused in him as themselves "revealed or, as it were, recalled" (Tolstoy 1940, 188).¹⁹ There, then, is that Tolstoyan question itself: why does music affect us like memory?

The intensity of Pozdnyshev's recollections prompts him to launch into a set of reflections on music in general, though it is the first movement of Beethoven's Kreutzer sonata itself which underlies everything he says. It is worth quoting what he says at some length, partly in order to bring into view the web of connections with other texts I have already quoted.

It is a terrible thing, that sonata. And especially that part [i.e. the first movement]. And in general music is a dreadful thing! What is it? I don't understand it. What is music? What does it do? And why does it do what it does? They say music exalts the soul. Nonsense, it is not true! It has an effect, an awful effect – I am speaking of myself – but not of an exalting kind. It has neither an exalting nor a debasing effect but it produces agitation. How can I put it? Music makes me forget myself, my real position; it transports me to some other position not my own. Under the influence of music it seems to me that I feel what I do not really feel, that I understand what I do not understand... Music carries me immediately and directly into the mental condition in which the man was who composed it. My soul merges with his and together with him I pass from one condition into another, but why this happens I do not know. (Tolstoy 1940, 186).²⁰

18 For an instance of such recollection in Tolstoy's own case, see the statement in his only letter to Tchaikovsky that he could not think of a recent concert at the Moscow Conservatoire "without trembling": Christian 1978, I 302.

19 Are there overtones here of Platonic *anamnesis* (a notion Tolstoy sometimes dismisses elsewhere)?

20 For music and self-forgetting, cf. two remarks by Lyuba in *The Light Shines in Darkness*, Act II Scene 3.

Tolstoy treads a thin line here, as he does in many parts of *The Kreutzer Sonata*, between evoking the surge and rush of thoughts in the mind of his character and treating that character as a conduit for views of his own. It is hard not to feel that he is doing both those things at the same time. The connections are obvious with his own perpetual perplexity over the emotional power of music, and with the troubled self-scrutiny which would later manifest itself in the remarks on Beethoven's late works in *What is Art?* Among other details, the reference to "agitation" (which certainly suits Pozdnyshev's dramatic personality as well) chimes with "the obscure, almost unhealthy, excitement" which Tolstoy predicates of his previous, unreformed reactions to late Beethoven.²¹ Above all, of course, Pozdnyshev directly prefigures, even to the point of using several formulations which recur practically verbatim in the treatise, the "infection" aesthetic which Tolstoy was to expound a decade or so later.

So on one level Pozdnyshev himself reads like the author-in-waiting of *What is Art?* But that is not the end of the matter. It is also the case that, judged by the terms of the treatise, Pozdnyshev is aesthetically *confused*. Explaining what I mean by that will take me on a small detour through one particular area of Tolstoy's own musical experience; this will then bring us back round to an enigma about the account of music in chapter 23 of the novella. Pozdnyshev's aesthetic confusion can most easily be seen in the fact that his description of music's power mixes together vocabulary and ideas which *What is Art?* makes a point of separating. In particular, while he adumbrates, as I have already mentioned, a quasi-infective conception of expression ("music carries me immediately and directly into the mental condition in which the man was who composed it. My soul merges with his..."), he also applies the language of "hypnotism" which *What is Art?* reserves for cases of non-art or counterfeit art, such as Wagner's music.²² In the main assault on Wagner, in chapter 13 of the treatise, Tolstoy grudgingly and sarcastically concedes to the composer a power he calls "hypnotic". He does this in order to explain how the operas can grip and unite certain groups of hearers even though, according to Tolstoy's analysis, they are dramatically "so stupid...it is surprising that people over seven years of age can witness [them] seriously", and musically "absolutely unintelligible".²³

21 his comparison with ch. 14 of *What is Art?* is not, of course, intended to treat Beethoven's Kreutzer sonata itself as a "late" work; it was written in early 1803. There is evidence, however, that Tolstoy himself thought of the sonata as the beginning of Beethoven's decline into decadence: see Golinenko 1985, 958 n. 60 for Tolstoy's view to this effect. As regards the same passage of the novella quoted in my text, it is tempting to compare Pozdnyshev's sense of "understand[ing] what I do not understand" to that self-protective passage in the treatise (cited earlier) where Tolstoy was to write, *à propos* Beethoven op. 101, that "whatever other people understand of that sonata...I, being very susceptible to music, understand equally".

22 The other side of this same coin is that Pozdnyshev's "infection" model is combined with a statement of emotional incomprehension – "that condition had a meaning for him, but for me: none at all" (Tolstoy 1940, 186) – which is incompatible with the theory of *What is Art?* On this, cf. below.

23 Tolstoy 1930, 211 (where the comment is immediately on *Siegfried*, as representative of *The Ring* as a whole) and 212.

Hypnotism in this context seems meant almost literally and hardly metaphorically. In terms already familiar to us from other Tolstoyan texts (and which also happen, ironically, to coincide with some of Nietzsche's charges in *Der Fall Wagner*: but that's another story),²⁴ this hypnotism is equated with a special excitation of the nervous system in conditions carefully organised to stimulate a peculiar sensitivity. Comparing the experience to that of sitting in the dark at a séance "with semi-sane people", he writes: "It is the same when listening to an opera of Wagner's. Sit in the dark for four days in company with people who are not quite normal, and through the auditory nerves subject your brain to the strongest action of the sounds best adapted to excite it, and you will no doubt be reduced to an abnormal condition and be enchanted by absurdities." (Tolstoy 1930, 216).

One observation worth making here is that in the case of Wagner, unlike that of late Beethoven, Tolstoy seems never to have felt susceptible himself to any of the hypnotism: the most he allows is that "Wagner was not destitute of musical talent" (Tolstoy 1930, 214). But this non-susceptibility seems to have made his repudiation of Wagner all the more vitriolic, as though it was subconsciously fuelled by an indignation that he could not testify confessionally, so to speak – as he did with late Beethoven and as he makes Pozdnyshv do with the Kreutzer sonata – to the corrupting power of the works.²⁵ On the notorious occasion in 1896, described in both *What is Art?* and in his letters, when Tolstoy attended a production of *Siegfried* in Moscow only to walk out before the end of the second act, this factor clearly played a part. His successful resistance to what he considered the manipulations of Wagner's counterfeit art was turned into a disgust all the stronger for seeing a huge audience around him engrossed in the whole experience (Tolstoy 1930, 212). When he tells his brother "I rushed out like a madman, and I can't talk about it calmly even now", his almost pathological revulsion is in part, I suggest, an index of the degree of frustration he had encountered in exposing himself to a "hypnotic" music whose dark allure he could not actually feel.²⁶ The memory of this experience is also likely to have contributed to the vehemence with which he opposed his wife's desire to become acquainted with Wagner's works. Sophia's diaries record how her wish to attend some productions of Wagner in St Petersburg in 1898 "provoked from Lev Nikolaevich such an angry flood of criticisms and biting references to my insane love of music, my stupidity, my ineptitude, etc., etc.,

24 Nietzsche accuses Wagner of being himself neurotic and of working on the nerves of his audiences by "hypnotic" means: *Der Fall Wagner* (1888) §§5–7; the editors of Nietzsche 1988, XIII 136 (11[323]) cross-refer to a note of 1887–1888 for the hypnotism motif in connection with Wagner. Despite Tolstoy's loathing for Nietzsche, I suspect that he could have read, or at least heard of, the latter's critique of Wagner when he was working on *What is Art?*

25 One might draw an interesting contrast here with Nietzsche's turn against Wagner.

26 See the letter of 19th April 1896, written the day after the performance: Christian 1978, II 538. Cf. Tolstoy 1930, 213, "I escaped from the theatre with a feeling of repulsion which even now I cannot forget". The letter to his brother says he could not even sit through a single act, but the account in *What is Art?* states that he stayed till after "the fight with the monster" (i.e. Act II).

that he has completely killed my desire to do anything.” This clash, so typical of the harrowing tensions that marked the later years of their marriage (and which included other disagreements over music), contributed to bouts of depression and insomnia on Sophia’s part. And even when Tolstoy belatedly relented, this came too late to make any difference. Sophia never did fulfil her “dream”, as she called it, of hearing Wagner’s music in the theatre.²⁷

After that detour through Tolstoy’s use of the idea of “hypnotism” to come to terms with the observed power of Wagner’s supposedly counterfeit art, we can now return to chapter 23 of *The Kreutzer Sonata* and to the enigma which I believe that Tolstoy, consciously or otherwise, builds into his character’s account of music. The enigma emerges when one tries to make sense of this account within the psychological and narrative trajectory of the novella. The nub of the problem is this: what exactly is the impact that hearing the Kreutzer sonata is supposed to have on the psychological state of Pozdnyshev and the unfolding of his story? Having reiterated how “terrible” the effects of music can be and having stressed the dangers of its hypnotic power, the protagonist goes on to insinuate that the first movement of the sonata expresses a sensuality and sexual energy which made its performance unseemly in mixed company.

[H]ow can that first presto be played in a drawing-room among ladies in low-necked dresses?... Such things should only be played on certain important significant [*sic*] occasions, and then only when certain actions answering to such music are wanted; play it then and do what the music has moved you to. Otherwise an awakening of energy and feeling unsuited both to the time and the place, to which no outlet is given, cannot but act harmfully. (Tolstoy 1940, 187).²⁸

The erotic implications of this are inescapable, and they receive a kind of support from the independent testimony that Tolstoy himself did indeed form such an impression of Beethoven’s first movement, though he later changed his mind on the subject. (See Tolstoy [S.] 1926, 603–4, Rischin 1989, 58–9 n. 64).²⁹ Yet within

27 See Golinenko 1985, 280, 300, 305 for the course of these arguments over Wagner in the early months of 1898, the very period when *What is Art?* was being prepared for publication. For other disagreements between the couple over music, see e.g. Sophia’s diary for Feb. 9th 1898, “my music torments him” (Golinenko 1985, 289).

28 Greenwood 1975, 140 speaks of the sonata performance as “almost...a metaphor for intercourse”; but his further claim that Pozdnyshev’s jealousy is “a deliberate inflammation of the sexual bondage” he feels to his wife is, while true of the story as a whole, misleadingly associated with the sonata episode in ch. 23.

29 The suggestion of Troyat 1970, 657 that hearing the sonata on 3rd July 1887 put Tolstoy in an emotional state which led him to father his final child that same night is based on a totally spurious reference to Sophia’s diary: the entry for that date has none of the personal details in question! Tolstoy’s long-lasting admiration for the sonata is attested by the choice of it for a celebration in his honour in November 1898: see Sophia’s diary for Nov. 6th and 8th (Golinenko 1985, 350–351).

the story these implications remain elusively oblique and incomplete.³⁰ Contrary to some readings of the work, the significance of the music in Pozdnyshev's mind can hardly be *reduced* to one of sexual energy, since he continues as follows:

At any rate that piece had a terrible effect on me; it was as if quite new feelings, new possibilities, of which I had till then been unaware, had been revealed to me. "That's how it is: not at all as I used to think and live, but that way," something seemed to say within me. What this new thing was that had been revealed to me I could not explain to myself, but the consciousness of this new condition was very joyous. All those same people, including my wife and him, appeared in a new light. (Tolstoy 1940, 187).

Since Pozdnyshev's life up to this point, as he has explained to the anonymous narrator of the story, had been one of sexual dissipation before marriage and what he retrospectively regards as "animal" sensuality *within* marriage, the "new feelings" and "new possibilities" which the music discloses to him must, whatever else they are, involve something more than libido.³¹ In addition, these feelings have a transformative effect on his whole state of mind which is incompatible with an interpretation of the music as quintessentially sexual in its propulsion. Pozdnyshev has previously been wracked with jealousy over his wife's relationship to Trukhachevski, not least in relation to the sensual intimacy of their music-making in private; and thinking back over the general voluptuousness of their musical performance at the soirée will later incite him to renewed jealousy.³² It therefore makes no sense for the joyousness that he feels as a result of the Beethoven sonata, and which includes seeing his wife and the violinist "in a new light", to be driven by an exclusively sexual energy. In the pre-publication version of the story which circulated in lithographed form before it was eventually passed by the censor, it is made explicit in this passage that Pozdnyshev's experience was *beyond* jealousy: "That music drew me into some world in which jealousy had no place." (See Tolstoy 1940, 230, nn. 79–80).³³

What then, to return to the enigma, does Pozdnyshev hear in Beethoven's music? Let me briefly mention three different answers which have been proposed to this question. The first is that of Liza Knapp, in an article which interestingly argues

30 Contrast the reference in ch. 24 to a short piece played at the soirée after the sonata: "some impassioned little piece, ... impassioned to the point of obscenity", Tolstoy 1940, 190. Cf. my text, below.

31 Cf. above (at n. 18) for the additional suggestion that the "new" feelings were also in a way "recalled".

32 In ch. 24 the voice in his head which argues that there must be a sexual affair taking place cites the consideration, "And they have music, that most exquisite voluptuousness of the senses, as a link between them": Tolstoy 1940, 190. But this consideration is a generalised perception of social-cum-sensual intimacy (cf. ch. 21, *ibid.* 177, 180, for earlier thoughts on similar lines); it does not entail a judgement on the expressive significance of individual pieces of music.

33 It is therefore misleading of Freeborn 2002, 134 to say that "nowhere is the obsessive nature of Pozdnyshev's jealousy more obvious than in the power he ascribes to music, particularly to the first movement...of Beethoven's Kreutzer Sonata".

for the influence on *The Kreutzer Sonata* of Plato's *Republic*, more particularly the views expressed by Socrates in Book 3, in close proximity to one another, on music and sex. But whether that hypothesis of Platonic influence is right, it is hard to accept without modification Knapp's thesis that for Pozdnyshev Beethoven's music "embodies...the languor, lasciviousness and licentiousness which, in his view, permeated the behaviour of his class" (Knapp 1991, 32).³⁴ This description may partly tally with Pozdnyshev's hints of sexual sensuality in the sonata (and also with his expostulation against the socially dangerous power of music); but it does not comport with the nature of the larger transformative effect which the music has on him. What is most peculiar about Knapp's interpretation is that in addition to the general claim just quoted she *also* thinks that Pozdnyshev experiences in the music a Dionysiac ecstasy which signifies for him his wife's assumption of the permissibility of adultery and at the same time becomes associated with his own assumption that murder is permissible: "from Pozdnyshev's point of view", as Knapp puts it, "both acts, his wife's supposed adultery and his actual murder, were performed not just under the influence, but at the explicit behest, of the music" (Knapp 1991, 33, 35).³⁵ But I can see no textual support for the inference that Pozdnyshev takes Beethoven's music to contain an exhortation to murder, or for the supposition that he somehow allows the music to stimulate his imagination "in too literal a fashion" (Knapp 1991, 35, 37).

A different position is taken up by Ruth Rischin in a fascinating article which ranges across many aspects of Tolstoy's relationship to Beethoven and, among other suggestions about *The Kreutzer Sonata*, detects the influence of the rhythms of Beethoven's presto first movement on the style and texture of the protagonist's own narrative (Rischin 1989, 44).³⁶ Where Knapp finds the Dionysiac evoked in Pozdnyshev's account of music, Rischin finds "the demonic", through which "music becomes a bestializing force, an agent of the devil" (Rischin 1989, 45). This is just as hard as Knapp's interpretation to square with the character's description of expansive, joyous transformation in chapter 23. Rischin relies partly on the fact that the devil is actually introduced, in chapter 26, as a kind of interior voice of Pozdnyshev's, urging him to resist all impulses to sentimental feeling.³⁷ But there is no traceable connection between that moment in the story and the events of the earlier soirée. Indeed, part of the enigma of the role of the Kreutzer sonata in the narrative stems from the total absence of *any* reference back to the character of this

34 Cf. 26–32 for the hypothesised influence of Tolstoy's reading of the *Republic*.

35 It would require further analysis to discuss the ways in which Tolstoy's narrator actually occludes our view of the musical experience of his wife, including the differences between the roles of listener and performer.

36 For another attempt to see Beethoven's sonata as influencing the form of Tolstoy's own story, see Green 1967, 17–22; cf. the summary in Christian 1969, 232–233. Green's arguments are thought-provoking but too dependent on a loose analogy between the story's structure and sonata form.

37 Rischin 1989, 45–46.

music after chapter 23 itself. When Pozdnyshev does recall some of the evening's music in chapter 24, at the point where his jealousy (transcended, remember, by experience of the sonata) has been renewed, what he remembers is not the sonata itself but "some impassioned little piece, ...impassioned to the point of obscenity", which the couple had played *after* the sonata. (See n. 30 above).

That last detail, as it happens, is exploited but also, I think, distorted in the final interpretation I want to mention. In a densely psychoanalytic reading of the story (as well as a detailed decoding of the sonata itself), Lawrence Kramer adduces Pozdnyshev's recollection of the "impassioned little piece" to support the contention that "only through this little extra piece does the element of phallic display in the Beethoven, and its effect of virtual adultery, become manifest" (Kramer 2006, 149).³⁸ But this is hermeneutically illicit, and for two reasons: first, because we are not given any reason to infer that in recalling the little piece Pozdnyshev is recognising "through it" something about the Kreutzer sonata itself; secondly, because Pozdnyshev's sudden, retrospective recognition (as he thinks) of his wife's and Trukhachevski's guilt is only contingently related to the music as such – he knew the little piece for what it was at the time, but it is only now that his recollection of the look on the couple's *faces* as they played it brings a flash of certainty about their sexual liaison. As for the rest of Kramer's interpretation of chapter 23, it involves a curious combination of disparate strands. He claims that Pozdnyshev hears in the music, on the one hand, "the feminine flaw within the diamond of masculinity", and, on the other, "a movement of transcendence, a breakthrough into a spirituality quite inconsistent with the lust...of the drawing room" (Kramer 2006, 145, 149).³⁹ The "feminine flaw" Kramer speaks of is betrayed partly by the second movement of Beethoven's sonata (which Pozdnyshev simply describes as "the beautiful, but common and unoriginal, andante with trite variations"), and partly by the second subject of the first movement. Whatever value the categories of "masculine" and "feminine" may have in describing the expressive dimensions of Beethoven's music, I think that the "feminine flaw" reading of Pozdnyshev's/Tolstoy's mind (Kramer moves backwards and forwards indiscriminately between the two of them) is largely in Kramer's eye.

Knapp, Rischin and Kramer all have interesting things to say about Pozdnyshev's relationship to the Kreutzer sonata, but none of them provides a cogent solution to the enigma at the heart of chapter 23. That, I maintain, is because there is and can be no clear-cut answer to the question of what Pozdnyshev experiences in the first movement of the Kreutzer sonata: his account is irredeemably unstable and confused. It is possible to regard this confusion as a piece of psychological

38 Kramer later calls the little piece "the real agent of seduction" and tries to explain why Tolstoy "need[s]" this piece for his purposes.

39 Compare Green 1967, 20–21, who speculates that Tolstoy may have heard Beethoven's sonata as a dialogue and struggle between a man and a woman; cf. n. 42 below.

characterisation in its own right, but perhaps also as a reflection of Tolstoy's own disturbed perplexity about music. It would even be possible to argue, though it is not my primary intention to do so here, that the mystifying elements in chapter 23 constitute a flaw in the work as a whole, one of several things which make it, for all its power to shock, the "artistically wrong and false" creation which Tolstoy himself, in a certain mood, saw that it was.⁴⁰ My immediate aim, however, is to emphasise that Tolstoy's text presents us with a character whose willingness to condemn the power of music is rendered barely intelligible by his inability to make sense of his experience of it.

Let me underline, in schematic summary, what I mean by the instability and confusion in Pozdnyshv's account of his experience of music. Using elements which we know from other writings played a part in Tolstoy's own reflections on music, Pozdnyshv begins with the idea of "agitation", a kind of nervous excitation which in itself he does not count as either wholesome or harmful. But he then superimposes on this idea a state of self-forgetting and a transformative assimilation to another mind (a mind he identifies, in prefiguration of *What is Art?*, with that of the composer). "Agitation" and emotional assimilation to (or, as Tolstoy would later say, "infection" with) the composer's feelings as embodied in the work appear to be very different models of musical psychology. Pozdnyshv's attempt to merge them is, at best, a symptom of his own incomprehension ("What is it? I don't understand it."). Furthermore, he seems to want "agitation" to cover two somewhat different conditions of unfulfilled feeling. When he says that Beethoven's original state of mind must have meant something to the composer but means nothing at all to Pozdnyshv himself, and that is why music "only agitates and doesn't lead to a conclusion", not only is he contradicting the thesis of Tolstoy's later treatise, in which the whole point about emotional infection is that it carries its own meaning with it (the recipient feels *exactly* what the artist felt); he is also committing himself to the idea that music requires "completion" by physical action, without which the nervous energy aroused by the music will remain mere agitation. But if one knows what action would be appropriate completion for particular music, then it seems that one knows what the music "means"; and, conversely, if the music has no meaning at all for a hearer, as Pozdnyshv says of the Kreutzer sonata, then how could that hearer even imagine performing actions that would complete or complement it?

Two further features of instability in the aesthetic psychology of chapter 23 were indicated earlier in my discussion and just need to be noted again now. The first is

40 Diary for 6th December 1889: Christian 1985, I 272. He had earlier gone further, deeming it, together with his short work *On Art*, to be "negative and evil": diary for 24th July 1889, Christian 1985, I 256–7. Cf. also his letter to Chertkov of 15th April 1891: "There was something nasty about the *Kreutzer Sonata*... There was something bad about the motives which guided me in writing it", Christian 1978, II 478.

that Pozdnyshev combines the vocabularies of “infection” and “hypnotism” which in *What is Art?* stand for different kinds of artistic (or, with hypnotism, pseudo-artistic) impact; which is to say, he mixes together, in Tolstoyan terms, a notion of authentic emotional communication with a notion of highly charged but spuriously engineered (and, on the hearer’s part, self-willed) nervous excitement. The other is that the suggestion of sexual energy in the music conveyed by the rhetorical question, “how can that first presto be played in a drawing-room among ladies in low-necked dresses?”, sits wholly at odds with Pozdnyshev’s sense that the music is telling him of “new feelings, new possibilities” which in some obscure way intimate a wholly different way of living and of perceiving others. As regards the ladies in low-necked dresses, we should also notice that Pozdnyshev is not actually complaining that the music is erotically endangering these women themselves. On the contrary, he seems outraged that music which makes such an intense impression on *him* is treated as just a subsidiary part of a social event by others: “To hear that played, to clap a little, and then to eat ices and talk of the latest scandal?”, he asks sarcastically.

If we put together, then, the points I have summarised – first, the ambiguity of nervous “agitation”, with its dual connotations of indeterminacy and incompleteness; second, the incongruous combination of agitation with a sense of transformative loss of self and merging with another mind; third, the mixture of emotional “infection” and “hypnotism”; and, fourth, the simultaneous suggestion of sexual impulses in the music with the effect of a joyous transcendence beyond Pozdnyshev’s sex-obsessed life and “beyond jealousy” – we are left with an impression that is, I submit, as incoherent *qua* an aesthetics of music as it is vigorous in its dramatisation of a pathologically overwrought individual mind. In terms of the narrative psychology of the story, the supreme paradox about this chapter is that it creates for many readers the *illusion* that Beethoven’s music itself contributes to Pozdnyshev’s murder of his wife – an “illusion”, because not locatable (or not made real) within the fabric of the work.⁴¹ What the story *shows* us is something strangely different. While the events of the soirée give reinforcement, in retrospect, to Pozdnyshev’s crazed jealousy (though a reinforcement, I have stressed, which centres not on the sonata but on recollection of the players’ faces while playing “some impassioned little piece” later on), the experience of the sonata itself ironically creates the one moment at which Pozdnyshev feels inhabited by emotions not his own – emotions which are larger than his ordinary self and speak of another conception of life altogether.⁴² Whatever Tolstoy may have thought about Beethoven’s first movement, and whatever he may even have “meant” (if he knew it himself) by including in his story the impact of the Kreutzer sonata as such (as opposed to

41 For one example of the illusion, see Sacks 2007, 294, claiming that the narrator thinks Beethoven’s music “causes” his wife to be unfaithful.

42 Green 1967, 22 suggests that the music partly intimates to Pozdnyshev the possibility of a different, less coercive kind of relationship between men and women.

the social opportunities for intimacy created by music-making), the *artistic* result of chapter 23 is simultaneously an enigma about the protagonist and an expression of deep vulnerability in the face of music's power.

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