



Research

The Role of Music in the Ukrainian Stories of Nikolai Vasilyevich Gogol

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Abstract:

This article discusses the role of music in the stories of Nikolai Vasilyevich Gogol that take place in Ukraine. The musical examples used refer to a selection of stories that were published in the collections *Ukrajinske povesti* (Ukrainian stories) from 1943, translated into Slovene language by Franc Terseglav, and stories that were published under the title *Maloruske povesti* in the book *Izginulo pismo* translated by Urša Zabukovec in 2010. By citing and analyzing examples of music from the mentioned stories, the aim is to find out how music is involved in Gogol's prose, in which situations it is used and what it expresses. In addition, the second part of the article mentions examples of operas whose librettos are based on Gogol's Ukrainian stories. One of the composers who wrote such an opera, is Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky, who was also of Ukrainian origin by his ancestors. He spent a lot of time in Ukraine and in his work, he used Ukrainian folk music as one of the sources of inspiration.

Keywords: Gogol; Ukraine; Tchaikovsky and Ukraine; Folk songs and dances



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1. Introduction

1.1. Gogol's origin and his first experiences with the literature

According to Miha Javornik's study, published in the edition of a selection of Gogol's prose (Gogolj, 2010: 547-548), three cultures influenced the creativity of the most famous¹ Ukrainian classicist Nikolai Vasilyevich Gogol (1809-1952). He had Polish² roots on his father's side, he was born in Ukraine and initially wrote in Ukrainian. Then he moved to Russia, where he settled in St. Petersburg and began writing in Russian. Gogol inherited his literary talent from his father, who was engaged in writing, and his father inspired him to paint³ as well. He was also influenced by German romantic literature, including Schiller and Goethe, which he enthusiastically read (Gogolj, 2010: 549-550). Gogol met Pushkin, who, according to Franc Terseglav (Gogol, 1943: 6), became even his best friend, and on his advice he began to read all the world's classics, such as Cervantes, Dante, Shakespeare and Dickens, and devote extraordinary care to a perfect expression in the Russian language. Pushkin was impressed by Gogol's first collection of Ukrainian stories, *Evenings on the Farm near Dikanka*, which made the author famous. (Gogolj, 1943: 6).

1.2. Influences of Ukrainian folk traditions

It is characteristic for Gogol that he collected folklore material, namely Ukrainian folk tales, songs and descriptions of folk customs and traditions. The collection of folk material was characteristic especially for the early period of his literary creation. He asked his mother for help to provide him folk tales and as detailed as possible descriptions of the customs and habits of Ukrainians (Gogolj, 2010: 9). Gogol was particularly interested in stories where evil forces⁴ appear. Thus, the real, everyday life of the Ukrainian man mixes with the fantastic-demonic world.

1.3. Gogol's Ukrainian stories

Gogol set all his Ukrainian⁵ stories in the environment he was most familiar with: his native village and its surroundings. He was born in the village of Vasilyevka in the Myrhorod Raion, Poltava Oblast, near the villages Velyki Sorochyntsi and Dikanka (Gogolj, 1943: 5). His Ukrainian stories contain three volumes of story collections, namely two volumes of *Evenings on the Farm near Dikanka* (from 1831 and 1832) and *Mirgorod* (1835). Both parts of

¹ According to the online portal culture.ru (Culture Russia, Михаил Булгаков), Mikhail Bulgakov (1891-1940), whose favorite writer was Gogol (at least in his youth), was born in Ukraine, namely in Kiev, where he graduated in medicine. Since 1900, his family also owned a holiday house (dacha) in the village of Buča near Kiev. According to various sources (including Nestruck, 2008) and (Wikipedia, Mikhail Bulgakov)), Bulgakov was born to Russian parents and wrote his works in Russian. He moved to Moscow in 1921. In his life and work, music had been very important. According to an online article on culture.ru (<https://www.culture.ru/persons/8263/mikhail-bulgakov>), he listened to the music at home as a child, as his parents were playing in their free time; they also occasionally went to concerts and opera.

² As Miha Javornik writes, Gogol did not accept his Polish origin with affection, which could be confirmed by his negative attitude towards Polish culture that can be observed, for example, in the stories *A Terrible Vengeance* and *Taras Bulba* (Gogolj, 2010: 548).

³ His novella *The Portrait* is related to painting.

⁴ As Franc Terseglav states in his description of Gogol's life and work, Gogol's mother was somewhat excessively religious, as she perceived the world as a threat from evil forces. In the second half of Gogol's life, the influence of "negative faith" became apparent in Gogol, which developed into a life crisis, leading to his death (Gogol, 1943: 5). Gogol spent the last twelve years of his life abroad, he traveled to Germany and France, and he was most impressed by Italy. In search of spirituality, he even made a pilgrimage to Palestine, and for the last four years of his life he lived in painful self-denial, visiting monasteries and searching for God, first in his native Ukraine and then in Russia (Gogolj, 1943: 7-10).

⁵ Another name for "Ukrainian" is "Little Russian" stories. According to the »Fran« dictionary, "Maloruski, Malorus, Malorusinja" are ancient terms for "Ukrainian, Ukrainian" or "Ukrainian woman" (Fran). Little Russia is a geographical and historical term for Ukraine (Wikipedia, Little Russia). Miha Javornik (in Gogolj, 2010: 552), however, states that the term "Malorossiya or Little Russia" was used at the Russian court to refer to the land around the Dnieper where Ukrainians lived.



Evenings on the Farm near Dikanka consist of four stories each, which are connected in pairs: the story from the first part "has a structural and ideological thematic parallel in the second" (Gogolj, 2010: 555). The first part contains the stories *The Fair at Sorochyntsi*, *St. John's Eve*, *May Night, or the Drowned Maiden* and *The Lost Letter*. The second part consists of *Christmas Eve*, *Ivan Fyodorovich Shponka and His Aunt*, *A Terrible Vengeance* and *A Bewitched Place*. The *Mirgorod* collection also contains four stories (also structurally and thematically divided into two parts): *The Old World Landowners* and *Taras Bulba* and in the second part, *The Tale of How Ivan Ivanovich Quarreled with Ivan Nikiforovich and Viy*.

2. Music in Gogol's Ukrainian tales

2.1. Sounds in the nature: bird calls

In his stories, Gogol romantically describes the beauty of Ukrainian nature in addition to the everyday life of Ukrainians, their characters, customs and rituals. The sound image of the landscape and the calls of various birds are also important. For example, in the first paragraph of *The Fair at Sorochyntsi*, Gogol creates a hymn to the summer in his homeland. "How intoxicating, how magnificent is a summer day in Little Russia! [...] Everything might be dead; only above in the heavenly depths a lark is trilling and from the airy heights the silvery notes drop down upon adoring earth, and from time to time the cry of a gull or the ringing note of a quail sounds in the steppe." (Gogol, 1999: 19). Even when describing the fantasy night scene in the story *Viy*, when the hero flies in the air with a witch on his back, sound impressions are important: "Is he seeing it, or is he not? Is he awake or asleep? But what now? Wind or music: ringing, ringing, and whirling, and approaching, and piercing the soul with some unbearable trill..." (Gogol, 1999: 92).

We find a description of the night in the tale *May Night, or the Drowned Maiden*: "Do you know the Ukrainian night? Oh, you do not know the Ukrainian night! Look at it: the moon looks out from the centre of the sky; the immense dome of heaven stretches further, more inconceivably immense than ever; it glows and breathes; the earth is all bathed in a silvery light; and the exquisite air is refreshing and warm and full of voluptuousness, and an ocean of fragrance is stirring. Divine night! Enchanting night! [...] The glorious clamour of the Ukrainian nightingale bursts upon the night and one fancies the moon itself is listening in mid-heaven..." (Gogol, 1926: 86-87).

2.2. Folk dances

There are many references to singing and dancing on various occasions in the everyday life of Ukrainian people. Gogol likes to describe the joyful spirit of the Ukrainian people. When they are happy, they usually dance folk dances *trepak* or *gopak* (*hopak*). According to the Oxford Dictionary of Music, these are "Russian folk dances in 2/4 time" (Kennedy 1996: 746, 296). According to the translator's note to the story *The Lost Letter* (Gogolj 2010: 13) and as confirmed as well as by the Russian musician Elena Starceva-Somun (Starceva-Somun 2024), *gopak* is an Ukrainian national dance. Gogol also mentions other dances, such a Russian folk dance *kazachok*, which is also a fast dance in two-quarter time (Gogolj, 2010: 24). The officers in the regiment in the story *Ivan Fyodorovich Shponka and His Aunt* danced the *mazurka*, the Polish national dance (Gogolj, 2010: 75-76). In the story *A Terrible Vengeance*, where he mentions the revelry of the Poles in the tavern, they dance the Polish dance *krakowjak* (Gogolj, 1943: 49).

The main character in the story *Viy* likes to dance: "The philosopher Khoma Brut was of a merry disposition. He liked very much to lie about and smoke his pipe. When he drank, he was sure to hire musicians and dance the *trepak*." (Gogol, 1999: 89). When Khoma Brut once with his friends drank a lot, he suddenly jumped up and shouted: "Musicians! We must have musicians!" — and, without waiting for the musicians, broke into a *trepak* in the cleared spot in the middle of the yard. He danced until it came time for the afternoon snack, when the household people, standing in a circle around him, as is usual in such cases, finally spat and went away, saying, "Look how long the man's been dancing!" (Gogol, 1999: 106).

In the story *May Night, or the Drowned Maiden* we find a description of how a drunk farmer dances a *gopak* in the middle of the night: "But that's not the way to dance the *gopak*. I feel that it won't come right somehow. What was that my crony was saying...? Oh yes: *hop, tra-la! hop, tra-la! hop, hop, hop!*" So a middle-aged peasant, who had been drinking and was dancing down the



street, talked to himself. "I swear, that's not the way to dance the gopak. Why should I tell a lie about it? I swear it's not right. Come: hop, tra-la! hop, tra-la! hop, hop, hop!" (Gogol, 1999: 87).

2.3. Music in everyday life

In the story *A Terrible Vengeance*, Gogol cites a lullaby that a mother sings to her child: "Lullay, lullay, lullay, Lullay, little son, lullay, Grow up, grow up wise, Win glory in the Cossacks' eyes And punish their enemies." (Gogol, 1999: 39).

Songs can even be sung by an "unclean force", for example, by the witch from the story *A Terrible Vengeance*. The poem is about the death and burial of her husband (Gogol, 2010: 60-61).

In *Viy*, Gogol describes the life of seminarians who go home for vacation during the summer. On the way home, they "earned" food by singing in the choir in front of richer houses. Under their windows they "begin a full-throated hymn". (Gogol, 1999: 88). According to the website belcanto.ru (Keldysh), a hymn is a type of polyphonic song typical of Russia, Ukraine and Belarus in the 17th and 18th centuries. In the beginning, hymns had religious lyrics, but in the 18th century, the lyrics of songs could also be patriotic, military, or love. In the story *Viy*, the seminars moved an owner of one house and he ordered to his wife: "Wife! what these students are singing must be something very intelligent; bring out some lard for them and whatever else we've got!" (Gogol, 1999: 88).

2.4. Music in national customs and ceremonies

Similarly, Carolers⁶ sang at houses and received gifts in the form of (festive) dishes, but not only at rich houses. Gogol mentions caroling with the singing of carols in the story *Christmas Eve*: "Noisier and noisier sounded the songs and shouts in the streets. The crowds of jostling folk were increased by those coming from neighboring villages. The lads frolicked and horsed around freely. Often amidst the carols one could hear some merry song made up on the spot by some young Cossack. Then suddenly one of the crowd, instead of a carol, would roar a New Year's song at the top of his lungs: Humpling, mumpling! Give me a dumpling, A big ring of sausage, A bowl full of porridge!" (Gogol, 1999: 20).

The Fair at Sorochyntsi ends happily with a wedding. All the guests, together with the bride and groom, old and young, among them eighty-year-old women, began to dance "at one stroke of the bow of the fiddler, who had long twisted moustaches and wore a homespun jacket. Men whose sullen faces seemed to have known no gleam of a smile for years were tapping with their feet and wriggling their shoulders; everything was heaving, everything was dancing." (Gogol, 1926: 54).

Also in *St. John's Eve* there is a passage that describes the celebration of the wedding: the customs, clothes, music and dances. "[...] they baked a lot of cakes, sewed a lot of napkins and kerchiefs, rolled out a barrel of vodka; the young couple was seated on the table; the round loaf was cut; they struck up the bandore, cymbals, pipes and mandolins—and the fun began . . . Weddings in the old days were no comparison with ours." (Gogol, 1999: 6). [...] "how young women in tall headdresses, the upper part made all of gold brocade, with a small cutout behind and a golden kerchief peeking from it, with two little peaks of the finest black astrakhan, one pointing backward and the other forward, in blue jackets of the best silk with red flaps, stepped out imposingly one by one, arms akimbo, and rhythmically stamped away at the gopak" (Gogol, 1999: 6).

The story *A Terrible Vengeance* begins with a description of a wedding, where musicians played drums, cymbals and violins, and one of the Cossacks danced the kazachok (Gogol, 2010: 24).

2.5. Folk songs

2.5.1. Love song

In *The Fair at Sorochyntsi*, a girl in love takes a mirror in her hands and sings a happy, jumping Ukrainian folk song, which was her favorite: "Little green periwinkle, Twine lower

⁶According to Margarita Kovyneva, singing carols is an old custom that is characteristic of the period from Christmas to Epiphany (in Orthodox countries, that is from January 7 to 19). According to Russian tradition, this time is called "svyatki" (святки). The carolers went from house to house singing carols, and people mainly gave them cakes and sweets.



to me! And you, black-browed dear one, Come nearer to me! Little green periwinkle, Twine lower to me! And you, black-browed dear one, Come nearer to me!" (Gogol, 1926: 52). (Зелевевський барвиночку, Стелися низенько). During the girl's joyful singing, her father enters the room, and this scene made him dance with joy.

2.5.2. Folk instrument »bandura« (or »bandore«)

A typical Ukrainian folk instrument, which Gogol mentions in his work, is a type of lute called a »bandura«. Thus, for example, the tale *May Night, or the Drowned Maiden* begins with a serenade sung by the hero and accompanied on the bandura. "Ringing song flowed like a river down the streets of the village. It was the hour when, weary from the cares and labours of the day, the lads and girls gather together in a ring in the glow of the clear evening to pour out their gaiety in strains never far removed from melancholy. [...] It was already dusk, yet still the singing did not cease. Lyovko, a young Cossack, the son of the village Head, slipped away from the singers with a bandura in his hands. He was wearing an astrakhan cap. The Cossack walked down the street thrumming on the strings of his instrument and dancing to it." (Gogol, 1999: 78). When the hero approached the house where the girl lived, he sang a Ukrainian folk song, from which Gogol quotes the first stanza "The sun is low, the evening's nigh, come out to me, my little heart!" (Сонце низенько, вечер близенько, / Вийди до мене, моє серденько!). (Gogol, 1999: 79).

In the continuation of this story, a group of boys, accompanied by a bandura, sings a humorous song »Laddies, have you heard the news now!« ("Хлопці, слічили ли ви?"), with which they want to tease the master (Gogol, 1999: 99-100).

There is another scene in the same story where the hero Levko sings a Ukrainian folk song accompanied by a bandura. It is a night scene by the lake near the home of a rusalka or an enchanted drowned woman. "There was a sense of sweet stillness and space and freedom in Lyovko's heart. Tuning his bandura, he began playing it and singing: "Oh, thou moon, my darling moon! And thou, glowing clear sunrise! Oh, shine brightly o'er the cottage, Where my lovely maiden lies!" (Gogol, 1999: 110).

2.6.1. Singing tradition in the town of Glukhov

In the conclusion of the story *A Terrible Vengeance*, Gogol describes the singing of a blind folk singer from Glukhov. Ukrainian folk singers and the town of Glukhov have historically been of great importance for all Ukrainian and Russian classical music: "In the town of Glukhov people gathered around the old bandore player and listened for an hour as the blind man played his bandore. No bandore player had ever sung such wonderful songs or sung them so well. First he sang about the old hetmans, about Sagaidachny and Khmelnytsky. Times were different then: the Cossacks were in their glory; their steeds trampled down their enemies, and no one dared to mock them. The old man sang merry songs, too, and kept glancing around at the people as if he could see; and his fingers, with little bone picks attached to them, flew like flies over the strings, and it seemed the strings played of themselves; and the people around him, the old ones with their heads hanging, and the young ones looking up at the old man, dared not even whisper to one another" (Gogol, 1999: 56-57).

According to a Russian musicologist Mikhail Kazinik (2021), Ukraine has always been famous as a country of singers. That is why Catherine the Great founded an Orthodox singing academy in Ukraine, namely in the city of Glukhov. The greatest Ukrainian composers, such as Maksim Berezovsky and Dimitry Bortnyansky, who were both born in Glukhov, graduated from this academy.

2.6.2. Dmitry Stepanovich Bortnyansky

Dmitry Stepanovich Bortnyansky (1751-1825) is classified in the Oxford Dictionary of Music as a Russian composer. As we learn from Wikipedia (Dimitrij Stepanovič Bortnjanski), at the age of eight he started singing in the choir of the court chapel in St. Petersburg. Between 1765 and 1768, the conductor of the court choir was the Italian composer Baldassare Galuppi, with whom he studied composition. According to the Oxford Dictionary, Bortnyansky followed Galuppi to Venice in 1768, where his own operas were staged in 1776, and two years later they were staged in Modena. He remained in Italy until 1779, when he returned to Russia and became the leader of the imperial church choir, for which



he wrote a large number of compositions. As we read further in the aforementioned dictionary, his ecclesiastical works were published in St. Petersburg in ten volumes published and edited by Tchaikovsky (Kennedy, 1996: 88). As Mihail Kazinik claims, Bortnyansky can be counted among the founders of the tradition of Russian classical music (Kazinik, 2022).

2.6.3. Maksim Sozontovich Berezovsky

There is no information about Maksim Sozontovich Berezovsky (c. 1745-1777) in the Oxford Music Dictionary, although according to Mihail Kazinik (2021 b) he was very important in the history of Ukrainian music. According to (Wikipedia, Maxim Berezovsky), together with Bortnyansky and Artemy Vedel, he belongs to the three most important Ukrainian composers of the 18th century. Just like Bortnyansky, Berezovsky was a member of the imperial singing chapel in St. Petersburg, where all the best talented musicians were sent, and he studied composition with the famous Italian composer Galuppi, and then went to Italy, namely to Bologna (Wikipedia, Maxim Berezovsky). Mihail Kazinik points out that Berezovsky became a honorary member of the Bologna Academy (Kazinik, 2020). Unfortunately, Berezovsky's career did not continue successfully after his return to the Russian Empire, because he did not achieve the same success and honor in his homeland as he did abroad. In the Russian Empire in that period, foreign artists were preferred, who also earned a lot in Russia, especially by writing operas. Berezovsky, as further describes Mihail Kazinik, has been forgotten for many years in history (Kazinik, 2020).

2.6.4. Gogol's Ukrainian stories as opera libretto

Gogol's stories have often served as a template for opera librettos written by famous Russian composers. Thus, Modest Mussorgsky is the author of the opera *The Fair at Sorochyntsi*, for which he himself wrote a libretto after a Gogol's story (1876-81). The opera remained unfinished at the composer's death, and different composers contributed their own version of the ending, including César Cui and Nikolai Cherepnin (Wikipedia, The Fair at Sorochyntsi). In this Mussorgsky's opera, the most famous passage is the »Gopak« from the third act, for which there exist many arrangements for different instruments and ensembles. Another famous example of a setting of Gogol's prose in an opera is P. I. Tchaikovsky's opera *Vakula the Smith* (1874), based on the libretto by Yakov Polonsky, adapted from the story *Christmas Eve*. Tchaikovsky reworked this opera in 1885 and changed the title to *Cherevichki* (*The Little Shoes*) (Wikipediija, Cherevichki).

3. Ukrainian melodies in the work of Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky

3.1. Tchaikovsky's origins

Like Nikolai Gogol, Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky also had several nationalities in his background. As we can find out on the kulturologia.ru website, the composer's great-grandfather was born in Ukraine and was a Cossack of the Myrhorod regiment who participated in the Poltava battle.⁷ At that time, his surname was »Chaika«, and it was only during the lifetime of his son, the composer's grandfather, that it took on the form Tchaikovsky. On his mother's side, the composer had European roots: his great-grandmother, who was from an Austrian family, married a Frenchman, and their son emigrated to Russia, as states the aforementioned website.

3.2. Tchaikovsky's First piano Concerto

Mihail Kazinik (2021a) points out, Ukrainian music was very important for Tchaikovsky, as he drew from it as from one of the sources, and therefore there are many influences of Ukrainian folk music. As Kazinik further explains, Tchaikovsky spent the happiest periods of his life in Ukraine, in the village of Kamenka, where his sister Alexandra and her family

⁷ A battle in 1709 when the Russian army defeated the Swedish army (Wikipedia, Bitka pri Poltavi).



lived (this was the composer's family, as he did not create his own family). It was in Ukraine that the composer heard the melody performed by a blind »lirnyk« (that is a traveling Ukrainian singer who plays the lyre) and it became the main theme of his famous *First piano concerto*. He reworked this theme in such a way that it no longer sounded as tragic as the lirnyk performed it, but it became more bright. Tchaikovsky's *First piano concerto* was first called *Concerto on Ukrainian Themes*. He later changed the title because in the second movement he used a French melody that his brothers liked to sing (Kazinik, 2021a). Even the finale of this concert, written in the form of a rondo, is based on a Ukrainian theme, namely the so-called "vesnianka" - this is a song that celebrates the arrival of a spring. A spring and a new life return in cycles, such as the rondo form, where the chorus constantly returns in a circle (Kazinik, 2021b).

3.3. Tchaikovsky's Symphony No. 2

Tchaikovsky's Symphony No. 2 is connected with Ukraine and Ukrainian music as well. It is also called the »Little Russian« or "Ukrainian" symphony or the "Crane symphony" (Kazinik, 2022b). In its finale, the composer used the Ukrainian folk song 'Crane', which he orchestrated differently each time it appears. According to Kazinik, this finale influenced Stravinsky and his *Firebird*. In the continuation of the last movement of the symphony, another theme appears, according to Kazinik, an "oriental" theme, reminiscent of Borodin and his *Prince Igor*. In this movement the connection between Russian and Ukrainian music can be felt (Kazinik, 2022b).

4. Conclusion

Gogol in his Ukrainian stories often describes Ukrainian folk songs and dances. Music accompanies people's everyday life: for instance, a mother is singing for her child in a cradle; singing and dancing are present at weddings and other celebrations. Singing in many cases expresses joy, because Gogol like to describe a joyful character of Ukrainians, but it also expresses sadness or pain. In Gogol's literature, a real life mixes with fantasy and the demonic, and even fictional or folklore creatures can express themselves through music or singing.

Gogol's Ukrainian stories have been the basis for opera librettos several times, as in the case of famous Russian operas by Tchaikovsky, Mussorgsky and Rimsky-Korsakov. Tchaikovsky, who also had Ukrainian blood in his origins, in his compositions often used melodic themes of Ukrainian folk music.

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