

Presentation for the GLS West Coast Symposium at St. John's College in Santa Fe, NM

Marja Karelia
Simon Fraser University
mkk9@sfu.ca

Kreutzer Sonata: Expressions of Human Anguish in Music, Literature and Beyond

The Kreutzer Sonata exemplifies expressions of human anguish through a perfect blend of music, literature and other arts. I will argue, as does Martha Nussbaum, that “music is intimately linked with our deepest strivings and most powerful emotions”, and that *The Kreutzer Sonata* provides the ideal vehicle for such sentiments having profoundly provoked artistic genres for over three hundred years.

Our chain of events begins with the *Kreutzer Sonata* that was composed by Beethoven three years after his deafness crisis. In 1802, Beethoven had written the Heiligenstadt Testament where he expressed his anguish about his deteriorating hearing and writes that “how could I possibly admit an infirmity in the one sense which ought to be more perfect in me than in others. What humiliation it is for me when someone standing next to me heard a flute in the distance or a shepherd singing and I heard nothing. Such incidents drove me almost to despair, a little more of that and I would have ended my life – it was only my art that held me back. It seemed to me impossible to leave the world until I had brought forth all that I felt within me”

The Heiligenstadt Testament was both an outpouring of grief in the face of his growing deafness and a determination to persevere in his art despite this impediment, and the result was his monumental violin sonata No.9 in A Major, Opus 47 for piano and violin. The Sonata was dedicated to the French violin virtuoso Rodolfe Kreutzer, who refused to play it. Never a great fan of Beethoven's music, Kreutzer found the Sonata “outrageously unintelligible” and said, that “one would have to be in the grip of a kind of aesthetic and artistic terrorism, not to find in this work clear renewed proof of the fact that for some time now this composer has been indulging in whims, above all striving to be absolutely different from other people.”

In the *Kreutzer Sonata* Beethoven establishes the absolute parity of the two instruments (violin and fortepiano) at the start of the first movement's slow introduction. It is music of hectic brilliance, with the players vying with each other in almost demonic virtuosity. In Tolstoy's novella, published in 1889, it even drove the protagonist Pozdnyshv to stab his wife in a jealous rage. The music acts as the driving force in Tolstoy's novella also titled *Kreutzer Sonata*, which was initially inspired by an unfinished

fragment from the 1860's titled "The Wife-Murderer" dealing with the moral situation of a husband who murders his wife. The development of the ideological and thematic framework of the *Kreutzer Sonata* was infinitely connected with the moral, religious and existential crisis in Tolstoy's own life.

Although Tolstoy was already acquainted with the Sonata, its performance in his family's Moscow home in the spring of 1888 made an especially strong impression on him. As a result, he returned to the idea of writing a dramatic monologue on the theme of a husband who murders his wife, but this time the plot would be fused with the inspiration provided by the music.

A few highlights of Tolstoy's life

Count Leo Nikolayevich Tolstoy was born on August 28, 1828 at his family's estate just south of Moscow. Both his parents died when he was young and he was placed with relatives and educated by French tutors. Eventually he decided to dedicate himself entirely to literature, and after the publications of *War and Peace* and *Anna Karenina* he was considered an established writer.

However, during the previous few years he had become disturbed by what he considered his unreflected and prosperous existence and became increasingly interested in religion. His conversion to the Orthodox Church did not satisfy him either, so he began a detailed examination of religions that gradually evolved into his own personal doctrine eventually developing into an organized sect.

The Orthodox Church rejected his doctrine and in 1901 he was excommunicated. In the meanwhile, Tolstoy continued to feel uncomfortable in his position as a preacher of poverty while living on his great estate, so he divided the estate among his heirs and despite the opposition of his wife, announced that he would forego royalties on all his works published after his conversion. He became an extreme rationalist and moralist, and in a series of pamphlets published during his remaining years, Tolstoy rejected both Church and State, denounced private ownership of property and advocated celibacy, even in marriage.

Tolstoy's last years were embittered by mounting hostilities within his own household and finally, at the age of 82, with the aid of his daughter, he fled from home, and died at a nearby railway station on November 7, 1920.

Highlights of the plot

The story takes place on an overnight train ride. The passengers begin a discussion on love, marriage and divorce and the protagonist, referred to as Pozdnyshev gets into a conversation with the unnamed narrator, admits to killing his wife and offers to tell him what led him to that act. He claims that the root causes for the deed were “animal excesses” and “swinish connections” governing the relations between the sexes.

After marrying his unnamed wife, periods of passionate ‘love’, that he also refers to as animal sensuality, alternate with vicious fights. Then one day Pozdnyshev arranges a musical evening with friends and invites Trukhachevsky, a violinist and former acquaintance, to play music with his wife, who plays the piano. His constant jealousy surfaces while the two are playing Beethoven’s *Kreutzer Sonata*, a piece known for its musical range suggesting emotions from dark anger to deep meditation to exuberant joy.

Pozdnyshev is profoundly affected by the music and complains that some music is powerful enough to change one’s internal state to a foreign one. He manages to dampen his jealousy but returning early from a work-related trip he discovers his wife and Trukhachevsky playing music together in his house. He goes into a jealous rage, attacks his wife and kills her with a dagger. He soon realizes that he has committed an irreversible act and at her deathbed asks for her forgiveness. After eleven months in jail waiting for his trial, he was acquitted of murder in light of his wife’s apparent adultery. However, the question remains: Did the wife actually commit adultery? That question is left for the reader to decide.

- **Controversies**

The Kreutzer Sonata was controversial for its time and was initially banned in Russia as being obscene, and it created serious tension between Tolstoy and his wife, who detected in the novella autobiographical aspects of their marriage. *The Kreutzer Sonata* coincides with a wider public debate taking place at that time in Europe about the “animal in man” referring to a dispute over the ideologies of Christianity vs. biological evolution. The Russian debate began in 1889 when illegal copies of *Kreutzer Sonata* started circulating in St. Petersburg. Tolstoy was the last survivor of the great Russian realists, and the reading public all over the world followed the drama taking place in the aging writer’s soul. When, in *Kreutzer Sonata*, he placed sexuality in the foreground of a depiction of modern family life, a storm broke out. His examination of these problems introduced the question of sexual instinct and marriage as a sexual relationship to Russian literature for the first time.

The book also ran into problems in the United States in 1890 when the US Post Office prohibited the mailing of newspapers containing serialized installments of the *Kreutzer Sonata*, a decision later confirmed by the US Attorney General. The case went on to the Common Pleas Court in Philadelphia that ruled that Tolstoy's novel was not obscene. However, Theodor Roosevelt, then a member of the United States Civil Service Commission, called Tolstoy a sexual moral pervert.

- **In the meantime, *The Kreutzer Sonata* inspired Janacek**

Leos Janacek, born in 1854, was a Czech composer, musical theorist, folklorist, publicist and teacher. As he tended to look east for his literary and musical inspiration, evidence of his pan-Slavism is found in the String Quartet No.1, after Tolstoy's novella *Kreutzer Sonata*, which Janacek owned in a Russian edition from 1900. The novella had first inspired Janacek in 1908, when he completed a piano trio based on the subject. The trio had its premiere in Brno on April 8th 1909, belatedly marking the Russian author's 80th birthday,

Janacek returned to Tolstoy's story and to his piano trio in 1923. The new string quartet, titled *Kraytserova Sonata*, relied on pre-existing material, although both works quote fittingly and evocatively from the first movement of Beethoven's *Kreutzer Sonata*. But it is the dark mood of Tolstoy's novella, with the husband stabbing his adulterous wife that pervades Janacek's manifestly dramatic work. Pitting violent motifs against more heartfelt lyricism, Janacek creates a series of confrontations and the music seems to be in a state of turbulent flux. Frequent reiteration of propulsive rhythms generates tremendous intensity and his melodies express pathos and ecstasy with equal fervor. At climactic moments, the collective sound of the quartet far exceeds what one might expect from four string instruments.

His married life, settled and calm in its early years, became increasingly tense and difficult following the death of his daughter in 1903. Following the Prague premiere of his opera *Jenufa* in 1916, he began a relationship with singer Gabriela Hervathova, which led to his wife Zdenka's attempted suicide and, to avoid a public scandal, to their "informal" divorce. From then on, they lived separate lives in the same household until Janacek's death in August 1928. Janacek's two string quartets: Quartet No.1, "*The Kreutzer Sonata*" inspired by the Tolstoy novella, and the Quartet No.2, "*Intimate Letters*", his "manifesto on love" inspired by his long-term friend and muse, Kamila Stosslova, have been called the peak of Janacek's output.

- **Another literary adaptation was created by**

Margriet de Moor, a Dutch pianist and writer. In her 2005 novel, also titled *Kreutzer Sonata*, she weaves an intricate tale based on the premise of Tolstoy's novella, the emotional connection of her novel with Janacek's music and a handful of finely crafted characters making it her own story, in which the unnamed narrator, a young musicologist, meets the famous blind music critic Marius van Vlooten. The critic, blinded by his unsuccessful suicide attempt over a failed relationship, and the musicologist travel to music festivals throughout the European cultural circuit. They first meet en route to Bordeaux, where the narrator introduces Marius to Suzanna, the first violinist of a string quartet there to perform Janacek's *Kreutzer Sonata*. From this chance meeting a passionate love affair develops between Marius and Suzanna. They become engaged and marry.

As the story unfolds, the reader is given glimpses into the sightless life of van Vlooten – a life that by virtue of his blindness, has resulted in an increased ability to use other senses in the absence of sight. The Tolstoy novella focuses on a tragic tale of love, deception, and loss. In Janacek's sonata for four stringed instruments, the notes played out the same emotions as Tolstoy's words. In de Moor's novel, the conductor of the string quartet tells his musicians to "humanize" the notes, and so de Moor humanizes the condition as well as the notes for the reader, who comes to realize that her characters are influenced by what is seen and unseen alike – the language of music. As a result, Tolstoy, Janacek and de Moor collide creating a sparse yet insightful study of the human condition in all of its frailty.

- **The Kreutzer Sonata has been an inspiration not only for music and literature but also for paintings, plays, films and ballet.**

Perhaps one of the most famous depictions of a scene from Tolstoy's *Kreutzer Sonata* is Rene Prinnet's painting, where the violinist pulls the pianist from her stool, his hand sinking into the golden fabric of her gown as her fingers brush the piano keys. The soft illumination and green cast from the small shaded candle leave the room with deep pools of shadow while the edges of the room dissolve into haze. In his narrative, Tolstoy does not make it clear if the embrace was anything more than Pozdnyshev's delusion, making Prinnet's dream-like setting particularly effective.

In 1941, decades after Prinnet's *Kreutzer Sonata* exhibition at the Paris *Salon* of 1901, the painting was chosen by the *Dana* perfume company for a marketing campaign designed to promote *Tabu*, the "forbidden" fragrance, a new scent created in 1931. *Tabu's* intoxicating floral, spicy, and musky notes

became synonymous with Prinnet's sensual image and the lasting popularity of the campaign earned *Kreutzer Sonata* fame in depicting the "longest kiss in advertising history."

- **Kreutzer Sonata Theatre adaptations include**

- A 1902 Yiddish play and an English language version, which debuted at the Lyric Theatre on Broadway in September 1906.
- In 2007 in Wellington, New Zealand, *The Kreutzer*, a newly devised theatrical work, was premiered combining dance, music, theatre and multimedia projections with both Beethoven's and Janacek's music played live.
- It was also reworked into a one-act monologue for the Gate Theatre in London in 2009 and revived in 2012 at La Mama Experimental Theatre Club in New York City.

- ***The Kreutzer Sonata* has been adapted for film well over a dozen times between 1911 and 2013 in many European countries and in the USA, where**

in a 2008 version, Edgar is married to a beautiful concert Violinist Abby, but despite two children and a happy marriage, sexual jealousy overtakes him when Abby starts working with a handsome young violinist. Edgar's possessiveness begins to overwhelm him and his marriage, as a tragic ending slowly develops into a certainty. The film features the music of Beethoven.

- ***What about Kreutzer Sonata and Ballet?***

- In 2017, over 300 years after Beethoven composed his *Sonata*, The "Ballet of Moscow" Theatre premiered "*Kreutzer Sonata*", which is not as much about love, betrayal and jealousy of the main character, as it is about music as a powerful means of influencing a person and their life. It is music that plays the role of the protagonist in this ballet.

The action of the ballet, based on the classical story, has been moved to a present day setting centering on the life and emotions of the wife of the protagonist, Pozdnyshev. As viewed by Canadian choreographer and stage director Robert Binet, the heroine is reinvented as a woman who sacrifices her personal ambitions for the sake of her family. Thanks to music, she wakes up to life as the music enables her to feel love as something unearthly, lofty and elevating. Inspired by music, she becomes desirable for her husband again, but her desire for freedom scares Pozdnyshev and that fear pushes him to murder.

The ballet is currently performed on the stage of the Stanislavsky and Nemirovich - Danchenko Music Theatre in Moscow and features original music of Beethoven along with music specially written for this production by the Iranian- American composer Gity Razaz. Robert Binet attributes great importance to the influence of music on the characters and says that, “Music connects the main character with her heart and soul. The violinist who she falls in love with is not really a person as such, but a portal that connects her with music, joy and freedom.”

Conclusions

The Kreutzer Sonata came to life through Beethoven’s anguish about his hearing loss and still captures our imagination as it has for more than three hundred years, not only through music, but through literature, theatre, visual arts, films and ballet. Human anguish is universal and I am certain that we can expect yet another version of *Kreutzer Sonata* to resurface when we least expect it as *The Kreutzer Sonata* lives on!

This presentation was based on

- Tolstoy, Leo. 1985. *The Kreutzer Sonata and Other Stories*. London and New York: Penguin Books
- De Moor, Margriet. 2005. *The Kreutzer Sonata*. New York: Arcade Publishing
- Various on-line sources and CD liner notes