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MEMORY AND MUSIC IN MIKHAIL BULGAKOV'S THE MASTER AND MARGARITA: DEFYING THE REGIME

Abstract: *Mikhail Bulgakov's The Master and Margarita reveals intricate intersections, which are negotiated via memory and writing. Witnessing the collapse of the Russian Empire and the emergence of the Soviet Union, Bulgakov devises multiple ways to engage not only with political and historical changes but with literary and aesthetic changes as well. Known for its magical and phantasmagorical abundance, The Master and Margarita offers, in addition to a love story, a narrative that reveals the individual's fragmented memory that is connected with existential uncertainty and lostness brought forth by political oppression.*

To illuminate the novel's engagements with memory and existence, this essay brings attention to musical references that Bulgakov employs to produce multilayered narrative dimensions. Although music in Bulgakov's novel has been mentioned on many occasions, this discussion shifts the emphasis from the writer's love of music to the responses to the brutality of the Soviet regime and to the conflicts, arising from the state's attempts to control the individual's memory, private space. In this essay, memory and music are presented as means to defy the state's dominance, control, and surveillance.

Keywords: *memory, music, fluidity, rhizome, multiplicity, multilayered*

The Master and Margarita is usually discussed as Mikhail Bulgakov's last novel, which brings intimate engagements with life, history, and memory. Margarita's and the Master's desire to exercise their right for freedom, which echoes the story that takes place in the Jerusalem of Pontius Pilate, contributes to the ongoing conversation about the Soviet regime and the individual's struggle against dictatorship. In this context, memory

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appears to be a space where the personal, political, historical, cultural intermingle.

Memory in *The Master and Margarita* has been previously discussed ; however, this discussion very often was shaped by Soviet criticism and ideology, situating the conversation about memory in the context of dualistic struggles that the novel overtly reveals: good and evil, spiritual and materialistic, life and death, etc. This essay aims to shift focus and to locate memory engagements that Bulgakov's novel demonstrates in the context of fluidity and fragmentation: for Bulgakov, memory is not an archive of stable items but a constant flux of interrelations, a shifting mosaic of fragments. This presentation of memory contrasts with the understanding of memory which was supported and promoted by the Soviet regime: as a stable archive of clearly defined items.

To disclose memory as a fluid entity, this essay will focus on music components, which add to the narrative not only cultural intertextuality but also mnemonic proliferations. Bulgakov's love of music has been detailed, but the current conversation will shift the emphasis from the writer's fascination with music to the ways in which he responds to the brutality of the Soviet regime and to the conflicts, arising from the state's attempts to control the individual's memory, private space. In this respect, music functions as a means to defy the state's dominance and to police one's own private space; music also helps the individual survive when they are confronted with control and surveillance.

Promoting the coexistence of the past and the present and outlining mnemonic palimpsests, *The Master and Margarita* questions the policies initiated by the Soviet government and subverts the foundations of the Soviet regime. One of the patterns, where music reveals its power of subverting chronological hierarchies, involves an extravagant group of the novel's characters that happen to be intricately connected: the editor Berlioz, Dr. Stravinsky, and the Variety Theatre treasurer Rimsky. These three names, which evoke references to the

famous composers, have links to another name, which is briefly mentioned in *The Master and Margarita*: Wagner. This current discussion will push forward the Wagnerian element to the premises of transcultural interaction and repercussions it produces for the understanding of the individual, defying political terror and control. The main focus will be the exploration of how this narrative orchestration that includes the famous composers illuminates the fluidity of memory, which encodes the individual's fight for freedom. Bulgakov's representation of memory will be described in terms of rhizome, which is understood within the theoretical framework proposed by Deleuze and Guattari. This essay will emphasize musical nuances, which help intensify transcultural dialogues in response to the politics of exclusion maintained by the Soviet regime. Undoubtedly, musical allusions that *The Master and Margarita* includes are numerous; but this essay seeks to initiate a conversation about Bulgakov's political stance when engaging in a transcultural artistic collaboration.

The name of Wagner in the novel is associated with Woland, the devil in disguise. When trying to narrate the tragic death of Berlioz, Bezdomny, having a hard time remembering the stranger's name, confuses a series of names, one of them being Wagner: "If only I remember it began with 'W.' But what was the name beginning with 'W' ? . . . 'W, W, W! Wa. . . Wo. . .Wo. . . Washner? Wagner? Weiner? Wegner? Winter'" (52). Mentioned in a cursory way, the name of Wagner brings uncertainty and ambiguity. First and foremost, it can be easily associated not with the name of the German composer, but with Faust's attendant, Wagner. Considering multiple references to Goethe's works that *The Master and Margarita* includes, as well as Bulgakov's particular liking of the opera *Faust*, this hypothesis has some solid ground. However, multiplicity is one of the most conspicuous traits of Bulgakov's texts—remembering Bulgakov's love of Wagner's music, it is worth exploring connections disclosed via this musical thread.

As Tatiana Kiselgof (Lappa), Bulgakov's first wife, recalls, her husband loved Wagner, *The Valkyrie* in particular (6). Although direct mentioning of Wagner is meager in *The Master and Margarita*, it can reveal other musical references mentioned in the novel—references that lead to the names of Hector Berlioz, Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov, and Igor Stravinsky. In a subtle way, Bulgakov conflates not only literature and music, but times and places as well. He surpasses the national limitations of cultural heritage and goes far beyond the confinements of the closed Soviet system that was rather hostile and suspicious toward Western trends and influences.

Pre-Soviet Russia and Soviet Russia of the formative years appeared to be receptive to Wagner's aesthetic ideas. Even though Wagner's works were not frequently performed, his aesthetic influence proved to be intriguingly significant. Providing an overview of Wagner's international influence, Barry Millington mentions, "[. . .] Russia proved to be fertile Wagnerian territory too, in spite of the composer's tenuous association with the country in his lifetime" (24). The link was established on the basis of the mystic and the spiritual that Wagner was striving to express via his diverse works:

The spiritual dimension of [Wagner's] art struck a chord, however, with practitioners of the mystical, Symbolist—inspired movement that swept the country at the turn of the century. Wagner's theories and aesthetic ideas were actually discussed more than the works themselves were performed, and after the Revolution too it was the anti-capitalist tendency of such essays as *Die Kunst und die Revolution* that appealed to Bolsheviks and intellectuals alike. Mass festivals were organized, often involving thousands of people, in a grand synthesis of music, dance, rhythmic declamation and decorative arts that unmistakably, though tacitly—art of the past not being officially approved—invoked the spirit of the *Gesamtkunstwerk* (24).

Wagner's oeuvre, ranging from dramatic, orchestral, solo works to diary, journalistic, and autobiographical writings, can be presented as a territory where a variety of arts fuse and

intermingle. For Wagner, reuniting the arts was not only an aesthetic principle. To some extent, reunification would reflect social changes: “this reuniting of the arts in the new, perfect drama would also mean a regeneration of society, an intentional meeting of art and revolution” (671). Wagner’s imagination fuses and combines diverse artistic media, gesturing toward breaking boundaries, conventions that keep the arts separate and isolated.

For Wagner, music turned out to be a catalyst for the idea of synthesized arts. Bulgakov employs music to synthesize cultures and histories; also music serves as a medium for transmitting memories, not only personal but collective as well. In this light, a trio of characters—Berlioz, Rimsky, and Dr. Stravinsky—which are overtly derived from three well-known composers brings attention to memory as a rhizome where various historical periods and cultural traditions interweave. For Bulgakov, music turns to be a world of quotations and improvisations: mixing the names of the composers, which are one way or another connected to the name of Wagner, Bulgakov not only involves his readers into a whimsical game that breaks the chronological and national boundaries, but also exercises his liberated spirit and imagination. Music is a way to escape control and oppression of the Soviet regime and to assert one’s inner independence.

Belonging to different cultural environments, the four composers establish dialogues that disclose the mobility and flexibility of memory. While bringing unique connotations, each composer of the trio—Berlioz, Rimsky-Korsakov, and Stravinsky — evokes an intriguing link to Wagner: all three composers were in a way influenced by Wagner’s music compositions and/or his aesthetic ideas the core of which was constituted by the composer’s striving to synthesize the arts. Additionally, while connected via a variety of aspects, the three composers reveal their genuine interest in and fascination with symphony compositions, complex orchestrations, and various compositional and performance innovations. Taking into consideration multiple

narratives, *The Master and Margarita* can also be described as a complex orchestration, with Bulgakov being a conductor.

Music allusions, evoking the Wagnerian element, emerge in the beginning of the novel. Berlioz, the editor of a literary magazine and chairman of MASSOLIT, Moscow's literary association, tragically dies after having a provocative conversation about religion with his colleague Ivan Bezdomny and a suspicious stranger, Woland, devil in disguise. This conversation, it should be noted, takes place in the Moscow of the 1930s: religion is a dangerous topic. In spite of his death, Berlioz's presence remains rather eloquent. The subsequent events keep returning to the opening scene of the novel: the present, as well as the future, is shaped by the past. The editor has his *idée fixe*—Jesus Christ does not exist and never existed. One may suggest that his death is some sort of punishment for his ideological and philosophical rigidity. Berlioz's death can be presented not as a punishment, but as a gesture to reveal the absurdity and impossibility of rigid structuring.

Berlioz shapes to some extent the lives of other characters: the lives of those he knew and of those with whom he was not acquainted. After his death, Bezdomny finds himself at Dr. Stravinsky's mental hospital. Here he meets the Master, who not only believes his story about the stranger, Woland, who predicted the death of the editor, but also has some insight into the development of the trial, involving Pontius Pilate and Yeshua Ha-Nostri. The mental institution turns into a place where the past and the present meet and mix, keeping the future blurry and hazy. While triggering a number of narrative proliferations, as well as musical associations, the name of Berlioz subverts a rigid chronology and a linear and predictable development of the events.

At the first glance, Bulgakov's Berlioz may seem to be distantly connected with Hector Berlioz (1803-1869), a representative of French Romanticism. However, when considering the composer's main musical contributions, the connection appears strikingly solid. Berlioz is known for the

development of *idée fixe*—obsessively recurring melody. However, he was also known for experimenting with a variety of musical styles and genres, seeking inspiration in a diversity of musical and literary works, and developing orchestration principles that would echo Wagner's ideas:

The beginning of the century heralded the liberation of woodwind and brass instruments, whose sonorities, both solo and in combination, now made more distinctive contributions to the orchestral texture. In opera, more specifically, such composers as Spontini and Weber were employing these timbres imaginatively, adding new colours to the tonal palette; such innovations were soon extended by Berlioz and Meyerbeer as well as Wagner (Millington 21).

The paths of the French composer and the German composer crossed in an intriguing way. Not only were they commenting on each other's compositions and aesthetics ideas, they also seem to have maintained creative dialogues through their compositions.

Bulgakov incorporates international music heritage, blurring the boundaries of geographical and cultural limitations. By referring to Wagner and Berlioz, for example, the writer, first and foremost, provides his potential Soviet readers with the world of transcultural communication. Bulgakov shows resistance toward the limitations that the Soviet regime was implementing in the cultural sphere: only pro-Communist material was allowed and supported at the governmental level, while the majority of pro-Western works were harshly criticized and eventually censored or banned. The Soviets' attempts, which were based on the strategy of exclusion and closeness, to sift out the material that links generations to their past, present, and future are critiqued in *The Master and Margarita*.

In the context of cultural and political resistance, another character, Dr. Stravinsky, produces additional layers for music and literary allusions. Dr. Stravinsky establishes an apparent link to Igor Stravinsky, Russian composer, pianist, and conductor famous for his innovation in the realm of music composition and

performance. Bulgakov's Stravinsky works at the mental clinic and he seems to be compassionate and understanding toward his patients, particularly toward Bezdomny. Bezdomny makes a few comments about Dr. Stravinsky, which, at the first glance, may seem ironic; nevertheless they gesture toward a positive image of the professor: "He's clever,' thought Ivan. 'You have to admit, there are some smart people even among the intelligentsia. . ." (91). Although his story about Berlioz's death does not sound plausible, Bezdomny feels comfortable sharing with Dr. Stravinsky how he encountered a mysterious person "who knew about Berlioz' death before it happened and who knew Pontius Pilate personally" (90).

Some critics point out that the name of Stravinsky contributes to the sophisticated intertext and links *The Master and Margarita* to the world of the supernatural. It is noteworthy that the name of the Russian composer is mentioned in the context of a mental hospital, the topos where the notions of the sanity and the normal collapse. Another direction this link can develop seems also legitimate: the name of Stravinsky evokes the subversion of limitations, standards, and norms and highlights not only liberated imagination and creativity but also the idea of memory that escapes suppression and control. At the clinic, Bezdomny does not question his ability to remember a mysterious story that took place at Patriarch's Ponds; in addition, his insane memories of the night are interpreted as normal. At the mental hospital, while the sane and the insane become blurred, memories acquire clarity and definiteness.

Revolving around Dr. Stravinsky, asylum episodes reveal Bulgakov's gesturing not only to the contemporaneity, but also to modernist and postmodernist consciousness—fluid, mutating, and fragmented. From this perspective, the individual is presented as a complex web of multiple connections where the past, present, and future blend. In the continuum of multiple links, memory functions as a means of maintaining inner freedom and as a connector to one's own self and other.

Organizing his transcultural musical ensembles, Bulgakov surpasses the national limitations of cultural heritage and goes far beyond the confinements of the closed Soviet system that appears to be hostile and suspicious toward Western trends and influences. As Wagner who sought to unify the arts, Bulgakov attempted to improvise with and in literature, defying the Soviet cultural life that was regulated by rules, prescriptions, and instructions. The Wagnerian element, on the one hand, intensifies the proliferation of various readings; on the other hand, it emphasizes Bulgakov's embracement of memory fluidity, as well as historical and cultural dialogism.

Bulgakov's embracement of transcultural interconnections that signal the fluidity of memory is further intensified through music references, which appear to introduce confusion and indeterminacy. The name of Rimsky, treasurer of the Variety Theatre, can be identified as a variation of Rimsky-Korsakov (1844-1908), a Russian composer who experienced a significant influence of Wagner. Devoting much effort to the development of Russian style in music, Rimsky-Korsakov found new musical stimulus in Wagner's *Der Ring des Nibelungen* (*The Ring of the Nibelung*). Wagnerian influence can be traced in the libretto *Mlada* (1890).

The portrait of Bulgakov's Rimsky is tinted with irony. Not only is he responsible for money matters of the Variety Theatre—an intriguing area that to some extent ridicules a widely promoted by the Soviets competition between communism and capitalism—he also embodies a sneaky Soviet clerk who would almost always prioritize his comfort and profit when making decisions: “The only person to have no interest whatsoever in the wonders of the Giulli family's cycling technique was Grigory Danilovich Rimsky” (99). Rimsky seems to hardly have any enthusiasm for anything—his interests revolve around lucrative and comfortable positions. When meeting Woland, a devil in disguise, he barely shows any aliveness: “Trying to put a smile on his face, which only made it look sour and mean, Rimsky bowed to the silent magician, who was sitting on the couch next to the

cat” (99). Rimsky tries to escape any situation that can bring him unnecessary exertion—emotional or mental—and, of course, that can sabotage him as a financial director.

Rimsky’s and Woland’s paths cross only a few times. What is intriguing about their brief counteraction is that Rimsky’s life drastically changes:

Stepan Bogdanovich’s removal from the Variety did not give Rimsky the joy he so fervently dreamed of so long. After a spell in a clinic and a rest cure at Kislovodsk, the aged and decrepit financial director with the shaking head put in for retirement from the Variety (330-331).

In the end, he quits his position at the Variety Theatre and joins the children’s puppet theatre. Like other characters, Rimsky evokes ambiguity. On the one hand, one sympathizes with him—an aging clerk, who seems to be tired of his duties, retires being incapable to handle tensions, overwhelming the Variety Theatre. On the other hand, Rimsky gets what he deserves. Trying to oust other employees that he dislikes, he himself has to quit.

Rimsky supervises the Variety Theatre, a place for entertaining shows and musicals. It is not that Bulgakov derides popular culture, which was intensively developing under the Soviet regime. What Bulgakov opposes is manipulative approaches not only to managing official institutions, but also to exploiting cultural heritages in order to promote the image of the USSR mightiness. In this regard, Rimsky’s attempt to survive within the Soviet apparatus is eloquent.

Rimsky-Korsakov, to whom Bulgakov’s Rimsky alludes, is known for employing a wide range of Russian folklore, emphasizing national trends in music. Moreover, he was also a member of *moguchaya kuchka* (the “Mighty Five” or “Mighty Handful”), a nineteenth-century circle of Russian composers, who, while maintaining openness to the international musical heritage, were developing Russian style in classical music. Apart from Rimsky-Korsakov, this group included Mily Balakirev (1837-1910), Modest Mussorgsky (1839-1881), Alexander Borodin (1833-1887), and Cesar Cui (1839-1918). One of the

kuchka's leaders was Mily Balakirev, "who promoted a supposedly progressive aesthetic line against a purportedly conservative—and conservatory—opposition" (Taruskin and Gibbs 710). The group was fighting against Westernizing Russian music; Anton Rubinstein (1829-1894), who established the St. Petersburg Conservatory, was considered one of their "enemies." Not only did Rubinstein develop the conservatory establishments, he also supported the westernizing of Russian music, and hinted that "Russian musical nationalism was merely a sign of immaturity and dilettantism" (Taruskin and Gibbs 711).

Rimsky-Korsakov simultaneously represents two camps—official/institutional and creative/artistic. A talented composer and musician, he devoted many years of his career to the development of conservatory music in Imperial Russia—the trend that the kuchka was protesting against. In terms of his kuchka activity, Rimsky-Korsakov started his collaboration with the group enthusiastically; however, gradually his zeal to produce "Russian music" was turning into frustration and eventually he abandoned almost all the doctrines of the kuchka (Humphreys 8-12). Rimsky-Korsakov seems to intuitively pick up on the limitations, especially creative, that vehement nationalism can bring. Moreover, the kuchka's activity was national only to some extent—Rimsky-Korsakov himself was referring to international traditions and experiences when developing his compositions. In other words, the kuchka's lamentations for authentically Russian style in music were proclamations and declarations supported by manipulation and propaganda, rather than actual facts and evidence. After all, the world of art appears to be alien to boundaries and limitations set up and maintained by doctrines and prescriptions. Bulgakov's Rimsky, eager to quit his duties, evokes the absurdity of official institutions and an individual's fatigue intensified by rules, instructions, and directions. After leaving the Variety Theatre, he joins a puppet theatre. It may sound ironic; nevertheless, it gestures toward the failure and toward the protest and rebellion against the previous experiences.

Imperial Russia was developing its own myths and legends in the realm of history and culture. The burgeoning USSR was following the same path in many spheres. Bulgakov targets the idea of exclusion, purity of national/nationalistic art, elimination of multiple influences that cultures, generations, and their memories are exposed to. In this context, the allusion to Igor Stravinsky emphasizes the idea of creative freedom and openness to a variety of cultures. While recycling the Wagnerian ideas of synthesizing the arts and genres, Stravinsky reveals the spirit of survival and freedom, defying control and oppression.

A pre-postmodernist composer, Stravinsky represents stylistic diversity and artistic unity: responding to a variety of influences, he produces his unique style and revolutionizes modern music, surpassing geographical and national boundaries. Born and educated in Russia, Stravinsky spent years abroad, becoming a naturalized French and American. Soviet Russia was alien to the composer who seemed to be inspired by freedom that could be embraced via music. Having studied with Rimsky-Korsakov, Stravinsky launched his own search for musical innovations and experimentations. Rich in a variety of quotations, references, borrowing, his music, producing sophisticated textures of multiple fragments which can develop into a separate piece, is haunting; it triggers imagination and disturbs memories, revealing their palimpsestic layers. Employing the past to engage with the present and the future, Stravinsky exerts one of the major influences on the modern music.

Bulgakov's Dr. Stravinsky seems to operate in the environment created by his own self—he works at the mental institution which is subject to his decisions and instructions. His figure is at times hard to read: he either manipulates his employees and patients or he proceeds with his job while attending to others without cultivating excessive sympathy and compassion. While remaining ambiguous, he is respected. In spite of his emotional turmoil, the Master finds his peace at Dr. Stravinsky's clinic: "I'm incurable," the guest replied calmly.

‘When Stravinsky says that he’ll bring me back to life, I don’t believe him. He’s humane and simply wants to comfort me’” (125). Although the Master doubts if he can return to his pre-clinic life, he is comfortable with the shelter the metal institution provides. In fact, by keeping the Master at his hospital, Dr. Stravinsky contributes to his peace and eventually to his escape and reunification with Margarita.

Stravinsky’s episode strengthens the presentation of memory as a complex and fluid network, which mixes and blends multiple components, triggering a variety of conceptual and sensory responses. Taking these effects into consideration, memory, presented in *The Master and Margarita*, reveals itself as rhizome and multifariousness, allowing a combination of a variety of cultural and historical links, influences, connections. In this light, Bulgakov’s novel functions as a memory rhizome, gesturing toward the complexity of creative process of writing and toward the intricate ways of remembering, forgetting and engaging with self, with times and places, and with generations. This interpretation of memory defies the Soviet strategy to reduce the individual’s memory to a set of data that can be manipulated to achieve desired outcomes. From this perspective, memory is a tool to preserve one’s individual memory and freedom, and to survive in the environment, controlled by terror and fear.

A diversity of music references demonstrates Bulgakov’s openness to the international cultural heritage—Russian heritage is only one of multiple sources of creative and imaginative inspiration. (Walsh 1). In *The Master and Margarita*, the musical group connected by Wagner contributes to the conflation of multiple cultural traditions, as well as to the diluting of timeline systematization and purity of memory. Bulgakov’s musical improvisations emphasize the idea of freedom and escape from oppression and control. In addition to classical compositions, the novel’s music assortment includes, jazz, folk songs, pop songs, etc. This aesthetic mixture promotes fragmentation and disconnectedness: signaling the collapse of the linear narrative,

fragmentation introduces existential instability and uncertainty that the individual faces while being submerged in an atmosphere of fear and anxiety. Through music, the novel engages with the political turmoil that reveals the individual's response to existential crises augmented by political oppression. By combining numerous musical references, which allude to the Wagnerian art fusions, Bulgakov responds to the Soviet program to construct a new culture while manipulating the memory of the past. In this regard, Bulgakov's music serves as a link between the past and the present, discreetly critiquing the Soviets' attempts to reduce the memory of the past, the significance of previous experiences (cultural, political, historical, etc.) and prioritize the importance of the current moment.

When the population is provided with the "right" memory that involves the formation of the state and the function of society, the mechanisms of terror and control are less likely to fail. By presenting memory as a fluid and changing entity, Bulgakov defies the Soviet regime, subverting the idea of artificially constructed and manipulated memory that was a product of and an instrument for the formation of controllable consciousness. Conflating music references, Bulgakov brings to the surface via memory cultural plateaus that the Soviet regime intended to reduce and exterminate, or on the contrary, support and underscore. Contributing to the narrative intertextuality and contrapuntal structure, these components demonstrate the individual's striving for freedom not only to live and create, but also to remember and forget—striving for freedom to have one's own memory. By engaging with cultural traditions in this manner, Bulgakov sabotages the Soviets' intentions to produce a New Soviet Man and Woman armed with the memory that will serve the regime. Memory, although subject to manipulation, escapes total control and elimination if there is the individual's desire and willingness to remember. In the oppressive environment of the Soviet Union, Bulgakov presents memory as a resistance force against destruction, physical and spiritual.

Bulgakov's *The Master and Margarita* is a novel that subverts the Soviet strategy to treat human psyche, soul as something that can be designed, regulated, and fixed while completing step-by-step instructions. More often than not, memories emerge in an unpredictable and unexpected way: multiplicities and opposites combine and blend, producing a plurality of variations. Of course, memories can be "engineered" and individuals' souls can be constructed and manipulated according to agendas; however, at some point an individual's spirit defies control and oppression. This protest can be internal and external: if books and manuscripts can be burned and ruined, memory, which an individual chooses to keep and transmit, cannot be burned.

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