

# THE CONCEPT OF DEATH IN TCHAIKOVSKY'S OPERA MAZEPPA : A semiotic analysis

This article explores the concept of death in the musical legacy of the great composer Tchaikovsky. Its understanding is envisaged through the analysis of Kochubey's performance scene and the dramaturgy of the development of the individual scenes.

The aim of this article is to reveal the particularity of the poetics of Tchaikovsky's opera through the prism of the concept of death. The development of the opera's plot, intonation, and thematic complexes, as well as the semantics of thematic forces and tonalities, led the composer to create a 'quiet' finale atypical of nineteenth-century opera.

The new religious-philosophical perspective in the study of the concepts of Tchaikovsky's operas has broadened the understanding of their tragic themes, their singularity of genre and style, the motives behind the plot collisions and the spiritual and moral nature of the conflict and the images of the protagonists, as well as revealing the textual and subtextual semantic planes at the verbal and musical levels.

The approach to the study of opera (specifically, Mazeppa in the light of its tragic concept) used in the article is based on the method of conceptual analysis, which has made it possible to present the musical text as a multi-layered semantic score through the prism of poetics as a system of means of expression.

**Key words** : concepts, Mazepa opera, death, performance, Tchaikovsky, 'quiet' finale.

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## 1. The concept as a semiotic term

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Musical text has an astonishing capacity: it can be interpreted repeatedly, which makes the process of learning it endless. It cannot be denied that an opera score is never 'all written out, since it is always more than what is written down'. This 'more' lies in the realm of meaning, which, according to Michael Bakhtin, 'is always slightly veiled, hidden' and cannot be reduced to 'purely logical or purely substantial relations'.[\[1\]](#) The semantic structure of a work is generally polyphonic and requires understanding, a kind of decoding on the part of the perceiver.[\[2\]](#) The semantic interpretation of a musical text resulting from this process depends on the objectives set by a researcher when reflecting on its content, based on the set of different cultural perceptions and spiritual values he manages, as well as on the aspect he chooses to study.

The notion of 'concept' implies an integration of meanings that are not only vast and holistic, but necessarily axiologically based, i.e., they relate to Truth, Beauty, and the Divine. Meaning is always discovered, found, and recognised by someone based on cultural experience, historical roots, and a particular context within which the concept itself is considered. This term is used when it is worth highlighting the importance and significance of a particular cultural constant as a particular issue, to reconstruct those entities that we come across in everyday life without thinking about their meaning a priori.[\[3\]](#)

Today, the term 'concept' is used to describe certain cultural constants that sum up man's personal mental and spiritual experience and perceptions of the world. The concept – we might say a condensation of culture in the human mind; a form in which culture accesses the human mental world. And, on the other hand, the ways in which a person penetrates a culture and, in certain cases, exerts an influence on it. Present in the human mind, concepts are not limited to thought, but they are also an experience to be lived, because they represent a whole synthesis of notions, knowledge, and associations. A

concept is therefore first and foremost a mental phenomenon of a generalising nature, constituting a mental entity, an idea, a concept.

Concepts are flexible, polyphonic semantic structures that can also be realised in musical discourse. Concepts have become the master unit for measuring the mutual conditioning between the creation of meaning and the creation of style in the process of interpreting musical texts. As the subject of diverse emotions and passions, of a clash of different world views and philosophies, concepts create a platform not only for empathy but also for the discovery of the essence of each of them, which in turn requires an in-depth analysis of the poetics of opera, of narrative and compositional logic, of dramaturgical meaning, of the particularities of the setting of separate key scenes, of the dramaturgy of images, of the semantics of leitmotifs and tonalities.

The idea of an honourable death for the protagonist was the only real solution for many composers: Verdi's *La Traviata*, Bizet's *Carmen*, Puccini's *Tosca*, Mussorgsky's *Boris Godunov*. Death is not at all positive in these operas, but there is something sublime about it all the same. It is as if the soul of the protagonist were being purified of the sins committed in the past and that death was a relief through the act of forgiveness. A phenomenon of this kind has been called a 'silent tragedy' by music specialists.

The subject of our study is the concept of Death, which reflects the semantic aspects of<sup>[4]</sup> the multi-faceted concept sphere of the opera *Mazeppa* (1883), a fundamental link in the evolution of Tchaikovsky's worldview and artistic style. Whereas at the beginning of the composer's career the emphasis was on 'intimate' lyrical and psychological dramas with chamber qualities, in the last third of the nineteenth century Tchaikovsky's operas embodied complex tragic and philosophical subjects that gave rise to more monumental works.<sup>[5]</sup>

The concept of Death, in its basic sense of 'end of life', relates to abstract concepts and generally has a negative spectrum of evaluation,

which interacts, as a rule, in correlation with the concept of Life and represents in the context of their relationship less a binary opposition than a holistic philosophical representation, a phenomenon of perception. In philosophy, human mortality is seen not so much as a natural phenomenon, but rather as a social phenomenon that requires rational perception and reflection. Consequently, the concept of Death makes it possible to bring together several levels in the study of a musical text from a chosen perspective: the level of content, the level of expression and the level of interpretation.

## **2. Tchaikovsky's opera Mazeppa**

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Throughout his career, Tchaikovsky was interested in death and dealt with it more than once in his music. 'I am not so religious as to regard death as the beginning of a new life, nor so philosophical as to reconcile myself with the abyss of nothingness into which I must plunge myself'. This piece of the composer's letter is by no means an isolated example of the way in which the concept of Death was a recurring subject of his religious and philosophical contemplation. It would be no exaggeration to say that in the various genres of Tchaikovsky's work, the theme of death is a cross-cutting one.

Tchaikovsky chose the peaceful ending of Byron's tragedy Manfred, whose death is described with the powerful sound of the organ. The Manfred Symphony (1885) concludes in a light major calm. The sounds of the orchestra fade and dissolve into infinity, just as life dissolves and disappears. In the lower register, however, we still hear the persistent motif of the Day of Wrath, one of the parts of the Mass for the Dead. The finale of the symphony is the victory of the hero, who has already repaid his sins through earthly suffering and has chosen his own end, desiring neither God's dubious forgiveness nor the devil's praise. It's a symbol of the courage we should have in facing death. Both Byron, in his drama, and Tchaikovsky, in his symphony Manfred, gave a striking example of how a personal human tragedy turns into a great philosophical generalisation from which people derive

their wisdom according to their feelings and concepts.

In Tchaikovsky's Symphony No. 6 (1893), the trombones and tubas introduce the chords, setting the stage for the grand finale, accompanied by the delicate timpani strokes. A captivating pentatonic waltz emerges, adding a fresh and novel element to the composition. The composer deliberately chose such an atypical size: the grace of a pure waltz seemed out of place in the atmosphere of a symphony imbued with the mood of grief, despair, and the powerlessness of a solitary man's struggle against the inexorable laws of life.

The finale begins. There is absolutely no doubt that the Adagio lamentoso is about death. We could not even have doubted it, even if Tchaikovsky himself had not explained that this was the case. 'The way everything ends', – Pyotr Ilyich told his cousin, and on this point, we agree with his words. The Symphony No. 6 (1893) conveys the overwhelming and inconsolable grief of death, portraying tragic endings, shattered dreams, and forsaken ideals. In the subsequent Andante sections, the haunting melodies of the brass and strings evoke a sombre and mournful atmosphere. The orchestra's final outbursts, overpowered by the chilling resonance of the tam-tam, exude a sense of despair. Symbolically, the triplets played by the double bass represent fleeting moments of fading life. The last six bars are barely audible, akin to the dying heartbeat of a fading existence. It signifies the end, a poignant conclusion to it all.

The complex metaphysics of the tragic problems of religious experience at the time is not only apparent in Tchaikovsky's particular vision. It can also be 'read' in the operas of the 1880s. At the time of *Mazeppa*'s creation, Tchaikovsky already had artistic and psychological experience of death scenes, such as Joan of Arc's leap of faith in the opera *The Maid of Orleans* (1879).

The opera *Mazeppa* occupies a special place among lyrical works that reproduce the situation of death. Its special feature is 'an abundance

of horror and blood', according to the critic and friend of the composer Laroche.<sup>[6]</sup> Mazeppa's moral tragedy is essentially based on the background between God and man, between command and permissiveness, between fidelity and betrayal.

The first scene of the second act takes place in prison and focuses on the image of Kochubey. Maria's departure against her father's wishes has put him in a position of severe moral conflict. He has two avenues of revenge open to him: revenge for his daughter and revenge for the 'tarnished' honour of his family. Given that Christian morality has never justified revenge, we must recognise the binary motivation at the heart of Kochubey's vengeance. In the first case, Kochubey could, on his wife's advice, 'shake Poltava' and 'with his right hand thrust' a dagger into Mazeppa's heart. This action could be considered honest, frank and even, in a way, noble.

However, the hero decides to embark on another, more sophisticated project: to write a denunciation to Peter the Great, which would expose the hetman's criminal and treacherous intentions. At the same time, as a loyalist of the Tsar, he was well aware of the order of Peter the Great's time – whistle blowers were handed over to the hetman for reprisals. Kochubey realised that he was voluntarily signing his own death warrant. In carrying out his plan for revenge, he reveals himself not only as an offended father, but also as the bearer of noble sentiments of truth and justice.

Kochubey is ready to answer for his actions before God. Languishing in prison, he prepares for the priest's visit and appears as a hero who has in fact resigned himself to the idea of death, awaiting his final confession and communion. The vocal component of the piece is characterised by a measured recitative, devoid of any exaggerated emotional affectation. The intonations of the psalm are emphasised through a chordal structure that draws from the traditional functional relationships found in Orthodox chant. (example 1).

Вот он,                      вот на пу-ти                      мо - ем кро-ва - вом мой

The scene with the mother (act 2, scene 2) represents Maria's first emotional upheaval when she receives the news of her father's imminent execution. In her final moments, in a state of affect close to madness, Maria asks her mother for forgiveness. Tchaikovsky's call, 'Forgive me', testifies to the heroine's tragic awakening and her confession, and underlines the borderline state of her personality with an ascending tritone leap (the reduced fifth 'B'-'F'). After witnessing her father's execution, Maria is not only overcome by shock, fear, and compassion, but by a real inner tragedy, a tragic experience. The truth revealed about Mazepa and about herself leads her conscience to a particular form of catharsis – spiritual liberation, epiphany, and revelation in the midst of madness.

Considering Kochubey's fate and his life's journey, which is undoubtedly informed by faith (remember the penitential prayer on his deathbed in the execution scene), it's worth emphasising that this hero deserves compassion.

### **3. The concept of death and the dramaturgy of Kochubey's execution scene**

In order to demonstrate his power and underline his status as an independent sovereign with the power to control people's destinies,

Mazeppa decided not to kill Kochubey secretly in prison. The hetman needed a 'scenario' in which his power would triumph – he opted for a public execution.

From a dramaturgical point of view, the opera's execution scene is multifunctional. As the final point of Act 2 and one of the climaxes of the drama in general, it is practically an element of the 'golden ratio'. Not only does it complete the development of the main characters and radically transform the image of the heroine according to the narrative logic of the plot, but it also brings together the fundamental concepts of the opera – freedom of choice and Maria's sinful love.

Maria suffers another shock and loses consciousness as she witnesses her father's execution. The quiet scene of Maria and Lyubov appearing breathless at the scene of the execution defines the psychological heart of the opera, as well as representing a magnificent dramaturgical device, which shows the mental evaluation of events from the heroines' point of view. Having met her mother and witnessed her father's execution, the heroine experiences not only fear and compassion, but also the deepest shocks of self-awareness and guilt – a true spiritual tragedy. The truth revealed about Mazeppa and herself leads her consciousness to a particular form of catharsis – spiritual liberation, epiphany and revelation in the midst of madness. In this context, catharsis is mainly about the heroine's liberation from the mad love that has captured her, from her own destructive passions that have caused her moral blindness.

The 'protagonists' of this execution are, first and foremost, Kochubey and Iskra, and the people who act as eyewitnesses. Mazeppa, who leads Kochubey's execution, is his spectator. But among the characters involved, we see another metaphysical hero embodied in death, who takes us into the realm of the sacred, the transcendent. The expectation and the unfolding of the execution determine the semantic logic of the dramaturgy of the entire scene, forming a particular profile of the tragic.[\[7\]](#)



The entire third scene of Act II is dedicated to this most significant episode in the opera. It is a true unit with a continuous flow. The composition of the numbers here is purely conventional, as the 'folk scenes' and the finale follow one another. Tchaikovsky achieved a high degree of historical verisimilitude with this musical composition, when its architecture gradually reproduces the traditional structural model of the execution: from the people's wait, the executioners' arrival at the execution site, the detachment of hired Cossacks accompanying Mazeppa and Orlik, Kochubey and Iskra in person surrounded by guards and monks, to the preparation for the execution, the condemned men's penitential prayer and the carrying out of the sentence.

In the execution scene, a crowd assembles in a field near the scaffold, eagerly anticipating the commencement of the massacre of the 'noble and wealthy gentlemen.' The execution itself is a grand *mise en scène*, captivating the collective imagination. Within the context of an operatic work that includes an execution scene, we witness the emergence of an artistic concept known as 'theatre within theatre'. Here, we observe a distinct 'stage' represented by the scaffold, 'actors' embodying the executioner and the victims, and an audience that becomes part of the scene. The moment is further enhanced by appropriate musical accompaniment, featuring brass bands and drumming.

In *Mazeppa*, Tchaikovsky portrayed the people as a living organism, perceiving the performance primarily as a grand spectacle. In so doing, the composer, by developing the libretto of the execution scene from the point of view of musical poetics, succeeded in reflecting the emotions of crowd psychology: pity, horror, and laughter. Before Kochubey's prayer, they will define the emotional and psychological component of the opera's third scene.

If we consider the 'popular scenes' as the first stage in the development of events, we find two contrasting sections in terms of content and structure. The first, that of the chorus, which has a three-part reprise structure, characterises the image of the crowd

flocking to the place of execution with curiosity and fear of the arrival of Mazepa and the condemned men. The entire episode is based on the intense instrumental development of the authentic Ukrainian song Гей же, тай журба мене зсушила, which is set out in the orchestral introduction (example 2). Introduced into the context by the composer to create a local colour, it serves as a background to the chorus part, where we hear the features of the male and female voices: 'Is it coming soon? Are they coming or not? You can't hear anything... Oh, we're so impatient! We can't wait any longer! What's the hurry? You came to see such a thing, so wait, don't hurry! My heart sinks with fear!'[\[8\]](#) The lively dialogue between the male and female voices is set to the sound of a dance song.

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During the unfolding of the choral episode, a profound emotional tension permeates the atmosphere, intensified by Tchaikovsky's skilful use of imitative techniques. Particularly noteworthy is the choir's expressive and impactful recitative, which effectively conveys the perplexity felt by the crowd. An example of this is the incorporation of a folk song in the diminished fourth key (from 'D $\flat$ ' to 'G'), which, through repetition, creates a lament-like effect. The emotional intensity reaches its peak with the addition of orchestral second parts and a dominant organ theme, heightening anticipation for the climactic final section of the episode. It begins with a fiery cry from the people, a prayerful exclamation of 'Oh, God, have mercy on us, spare us, Lord!', which sounds against the background of a reprise of the quotation song in the orchestra. The lines to be followed by the people in the chorus 'Redoubtable, redoubtable is the Tsar's

wrath, redoubtable, terrible is Mazeppa's judgement', are then developed. The powerful orchestral tutti, the harmonic tension, the high dynamic level and the contrasting polyphony of the male and female voices give the climax a character that is at once fiery, pathetic and dramatic, as well as underlining in a colourful way the 'state of mind' of the crowd feeling 'a lively curiosity mixed with a feeling of pity' [9] and fear.

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*ff* Та - ки - е знат - ны - е, бо - га - ты - е па -

*ff* Та - ки - е знат - ны - е, бо - га - ты - е па -

Знат - ны - е па - ны, па -

*ff*

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ны, и вдруг те - перь на пла - ху ля - гут под то -  
 ны, и вдруг те - перь на пла - ху ля - гут под то -  
 пла - - ху ля - гут под то -

The third and main section of the execution scene is the 'procession to the executioner'. New characters are introduced one by one: the executioners, the hired Cossack detachments, the Cossack chief, and the 'unfortunate captives' themselves. Their entrance is marked by the second orchestral march leitmotif of Mazeppa, whose exposition and development determine the three-part structure of the entire section. The composer particularly emphasizes the detailed depiction of the crowd in this scene.

During the development that follows the march theme, the orchestral score intensifies, highlighting the approach of the executioners, the hetman, and his army to the place of execution. The reprisal of this theme signifies the final point of the procession. As the hetman 'crosses the stage on horseback' (a note in the score), its sound becomes an apotheosis, radically changing its semantic character. It ceases to be a descriptive theme of the participants in the approaching procession and takes on a connotative meaning of the

'triumph of the power of the executioner-hetman' and his despotism.

The remarkable *fff* creates a triumphant march theme, with the resounding assault of brass instruments amplified in the reprisal and full chorus tutti.[\[10\]](#) The people cry out furiously: 'The hour of terror is coming! The hour of execution has arrived! Here come the condemned!' (Example 4). The tumultuous responses of the chorus do not stand out for their rhythmic and intonational variety; they are based on a descending five-note movement in the low third range, rhythmically following the formula of a march rhythm. Equally remarkable is Tchaikovsky's ability to utilise the expressive possibilities of dynamics, choral tessitura, and orchestral tonalities in the reprisal, thereby achieving two climactic points.

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fff  
Вот ве - - - -

fff  
Вот ве - - - -

fff

дут не-счаст - ных!

дут не-счаст - ных!

3

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3

In my opinion, public execution is not merely a punishment that takes away a person's life given to them from above. It is a proclaimed death, with the day and hour announced to the condemned in advance. Moreover, contrary to the hypothesis of a silent death, it necessarily presupposes two perspectives of perception that differ in their

semantic content and hold the interest of their correlation with the concept of the tragic. For an external individual, an execution, even if it is their own, is a death that is foreign to them, and its visualisation can have a tremendous emotional and psychological impact. For the condemned, the anticipated death is their 'personal apocalypse' [11], when the sacrament is performed, the soul acquires a new individual spiritual experience by looking into the eyes of eternity. The fourth section, which opens with Kochubey's mournful recitative 'Almighty God, we stand before You, confessing our final prayer of repentance', occupies a special place in the overall composition of the execution scene. Tchaikovsky, using the peculiarities of the musical chronotope, has introduced the episode of prayer at the centre of the choral fresco. It is not just a lyrical-philosophical centre, a static zone, a pause in the action where characters are given close-ups. It is as if the composer invades the inner world of the characters. In this case, the heroes' appeal to the Almighty can be considered both as an act of repentance spoken aloud and as a prayer uttered in silence. Kochubei's prayer 'escapes' the dynamic concept of time, the framework of immediacy, and the realm of real life. It is completely embedded in a different continuum – a spiritual continuum, which drastically changes the angle of perception of the events in the finale and allows us to apprehend the execution not in its social aspect (through the eyes of the people), where it appears as a distressing spectacle, but in its religious and philosophical dimension.

What is death? 'For the wages of sin is death', says the apostle Paul. [12] Death is an eternal problem of human existence, one that everyone faces at some time or another. Every human being is 'a creature confronting death throughout his or her life'. [13] Death is the only thing that takes away a person's freedom of choice. It therefore contains the very essence of our deprivation of freedom. The metaphysical tragedy of death is expressed in the fear of the unknown, in the inconceivable feeling of losing oneself, one's macrocosm and one's microcosm. The fear of death, in turn, is a result of disbelief or lack of faith, of religious doubt.

Death is an eternal problem of human existence. Its tragic perception creates a feeling of fear of the unknown, of the unimaginable sense of loss of self, which can only be overcome by faith and prayer. For the believer, death is not a tragedy because faith forms in man an unshakeable spiritual foundation, a humility in the face of the inevitable, because 'rebellion against death is opposition to God'.<sup>[14]</sup> Furthermore, to be 'at the height of the perception of death' requires 'extraordinary spiritual tension' and 'spiritual enlightenment'.<sup>[15]</sup> These states are reached through sincere prayer. Tchaikovsky attached great importance to this moment: he incorporated an episode of prayer into the execution scene, raising the heroes facing imminent death above the banality and vanity of life.

In musical terms, Tchaikovsky emphasises the sacred and ritualistic nature of the moment with a set of elements (see example 5) typical of the circle of Orthodox chants. These elements include sung recitative with elements of psalmody, strict diatonicism in natural minor, harmonic alternation, 'Orthodox motion' in harmony (I-VII-III), choral structure, and three-chord singing; dominance of pure string tones in the instrumentation, complemented by harp sounds in the second stanza.

Andante ♩=60

Гре-хов все силь-ный ис-ку-пи-тель вве-ди ме-ня в сво-ю о-би-тель,



**Poco meno mosso**

про-стри ко мне бла-гу - ю ру - ку: гре-хов про -

*p*

In the last moments of life, at the frontier of two worlds, facing eternity, the heroes show the people the spiritual strength and firmness of faith in God, which makes it possible to overcome the tragedy of death. It is significant that the people make the same 'attempt', crying out to God: 'Hear the prayer of repentance, forgive their sins, accept them, Lord, where there is no sadness, no sighing and no suffering of earthly existence'. [\[16\]](#)

The cathartic zone extends to the last part of the scene, which is rich in events: the condemned men climb onto the scaffold, the commotion on stage, the figure of the executioner swinging his axe over the heads of the victims, the introduction of Lyubov and Maria, who fail to catch Kochubey alive in time. The cry that rang out as soon as the axes were brought down after the execution is particularly evocative and impressive: 'Forgive them, O Lord! Forgive them, Lord!' [\[17\]](#)

The pathos of this moment is reinforced by the brief orchestral coda. It produces an incredibly powerful effect, not only due to the strong orchestral tutti and the extreme dynamic level (the score includes four forte markings). The theme of the coda is based on the expressive sequence of the second stanza of Kochubey and Iskra's penitential recitative, which is driven by an intensifying rhythm (see example 6).

Tchaikovsky, always attentive to the 'orchestral semantics', the choice of different timbres dictated by the poetics of the work, entrusts the theme to the piercing sound of trumpets and piston cornets. In terms of timbre, the instrumental prayer theme, traversing

the thickness of the tutti space, somehow appears in the sense of the tuba mirum, calling souls to the judgment of God.

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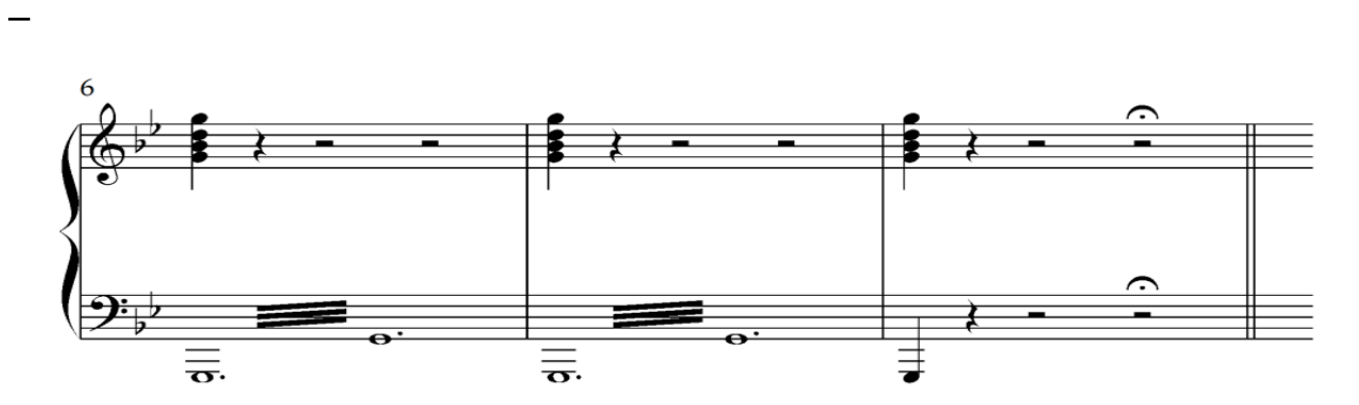
Musical score for piano, first system. The right hand plays chords in the upper register, and the left hand plays a descending line of notes with accents. The dynamic marking is *ffff*.

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Musical score for piano, second system. The right hand plays chords with a *tra* marking above. The left hand continues the descending line with accents. The dynamic marking is *ffff*.

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Musical score for piano, third system. The right hand plays chords with a *6* marking above. The left hand continues the descending line with accents. The dynamic marking is *ffff*.

The execution scene is unanimously defined by specialists as the 'tragic climax' of the opera, namely the episode of the penitential prayer on the deathbed of Kochubey and Iskra. The penitential prayer transforms the very act of death into a sacrament. The execution becomes a 'majestic act', the obligatory attribute of which is the penitential prayer of the condemned themselves and the prayer of the people for the souls of those on the threshold of eternity.

Tchaikovsky exhausts the meaning of the spectacle in Scene 3, before the prayer episode, after which the action 'switches' to an existential level, allowing a different emphasis and revealing the axiological aspect of the concept of death and the values of the protagonists – Kochubey, Iskra and the people.

Thus, the execution scene in Tchaikovsky's opera appears as a 'majestic act', which awakens the high feelings of the human soul – faith, compassion, and Christian love. This episode in Mazeppa has become another example of the author's musical understanding of the concept of Death in the various artistic and musical works of the 19th century.

#### **4. The 'quiet' finale as a means of expressing the semantic value of death in the opera.**

The complex process that took place in the development of the historical opera genre in the last third of the 19th century led to the emergence of a new type of finale – the 'quiet' finale, which was determined by the specific character of the lyrical opera genre with a historical plot.

The conceptual role of the finale is to generalise: it can contain a new image, be a result, a continuation, synthesise or transform transversal images of the cycle, and become a culmination. The finality as a category of image within the theory of genre content should also be reflected upon.

On the level of musical poetics, dramatic changes occur in the third act of the opera: for the first time, a zone of polytonalities appears in the score, and Maria's intonational vocabulary undergoes transformation. The typical qualities of her role in the previous world disappear from the vocal part of the heroine: exaltation, open expression, passionate emotionality, synthesis of romantic arioso and declamatory intonations.

In the context of Mazeppa's final encounter with the mad Maria, the tragic concept of crime and punishment is firmly established. The key of C minor conveys, as in Beethoven, a sublime tragedy, and as in Bach, a fall into sin. The crimes committed by power-thirsty Mazeppa lead to an inevitable punishment, which occurs both in reality and on a metaphysical plane. Mazeppa's part is dominated by expressive interrogative recitative phrases accompanied by timpani and brass chords; he addresses Maria with perfect minor chords in his part and with cries.

Before Maria's part, a solo violin (throughout the opera, Maria's part was not accompanied by strings, but now the violin represents Maria's soul) with trio intonations conveys the heroine's shudder and inner torment. In the scene with the mad Maria, Mazeppa experiences the moment of spiritual, 'moral' execution, when the heroine calls the hetman a murderer and a criminal. In Maria's disturbed mind, the image of her former lover appears as a 'horrible' and 'ugly' old man, whose lips are 'frozen with blood'. The unstable state of the heroine is expressed in the music through triplets, detached notes, and pauses that personify the heroine's troubled thoughts. The detached notes add a heart-wrenching touch to this scene. The violins and woodwinds resonate again, and Maria's part takes on a distinct timbre. The scene continues with interrogative intonations, with the composer emphasising Maria's madness through repetitions of phrases. The appearance of the oboe after the violin conveys the theme of love and Maria's emotional state, followed by the bassoon and flute, alluding to Orpheus' farewell to Eurydice, whose theme, piano, or pianissimo, symbolises the heroine's passage into the world of dreams.

Syncopations with trios appear in the bass, illustrating Maria's consciousness instability. The simple intonations of the recitative intensify the heroine's madness and delirium, while arias or arioso passages convey her stable state. The clarinet on a single note symbolises her state of fixation and depression. In the incoherent delirium of the young woman, there is a symbolic reference to 'it was not at all a human head, but that of a wolf'. It is worth noting that

the image of the wolf, which refers to ancient mythological representations of the werewolf, can signify both 'victim, outcast, persecuted' and 'murderer, persecutor'.[\[18\]](#) Indeed, his image perfectly matches Mazeppa's werewolf nature, completing the hetman's process of 'transformation' into the 'half-beast character'.[\[19\]](#)

Maria's madness plays a fundamental role in the opera and is part of a broader semantic context. In the transition to her final state of madness, Maria's part is already played in sharp keys, expressing drama and tragedy. On one hand, one can detect the motif of God's punishment. On the other hand, the motif of atoning for guilt and sin. Through her madness, Maria acquires the gift of "intuitive clairvoyance," through which she does not see Mazeppa's old external mask, but his true essence. She clearly distinguishes the image of her former lover to whom she had given her heart ('His moustache is whiter than snow') and the image of the old man whom she recognised as a murderer and a criminal ('And yours is icy'). The frightening image of the old man (essentially that of a werewolf with bloodied lips) becomes the reflection of Mazeppa's inner face that Maria sees and feels with her whole being.

The constant change of harmonies and chromaticism with triplets continues to convey the protagonist's madness, accompanied by woodwinds and strings. When Maria says, 'He is beautiful! Love burns in his eyes', E $\flat$  major resounds, bringing more temperament, and a 'calm' apotheosis begins. After Mazeppa's final words, 'Poor Maria', all instruments suddenly fall silent.

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According to our interpretation, the conceptual meaning of the final scene in the third act of the opera lies in the fact that it is within Maria's madness that her passionate feeling transforms into a different state, and the movements of her soul are governed by a new hypostasis of love, *caritas* (according to Nikolai Berdyaev), which is the axiological foundation of Christian morality and true spirituality. The basis of *caritas* love is compassion, pity, mercy, an unlimited sense of peace that brings peace and tranquillity. Only *caritas* love can rise above the weight of sin, guilt, the image of a mad world ruled by power, cruelty, and betrayal. *Caritas* love is able to transcend egocentrism of personal suffering and lead to compassion and thus to "transcendence," purity, transformation, and true eternal values.

This is where the ultimate meaning of the spiritual tragedy lies. This is what Tchaikovsky, in my opinion, emphasises in the final scene, where the mad Maria lulls Andrei, killed by Mazeppa. She is neither humiliated nor despised in her new state of cathartic madness, which, in terms of musical poetics, is embodied in the lullaby genre, allowing us to conclude how radically the heroine's consciousness has changed. The beauty of the melodies and rhythmic patterns is striking (example 7). Among the typical attributes of a lullaby, we can mention the moderate rhythm, which gives the music a peaceful character, the complete absence of affectation, the refrain 'dodo', which serves as a link between the verses, the 'sleep' motif, repeated many times and emphasised by the monotonous rhythm, attached to the lullaby as a

meditative element.

In this transformed consciousness of Maria, an entirely different system of spiritual coordinates emerges from the previous, distorted one dominated by blind passionate love. Maria's distorted vision of the world establishes the idea of 'spiritual enlightenment', which is impossible without the tragic experience of sin, and the very essence of her love is changed.

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Мария (укачивая Андрея)  
*p*

Спи мла-де-нец мой, пре- крас - ный, спи, мой ми- лый,  
(умирает)  
сти.

*Andante non tanto* ♩ =76  
*pp*

—

М.

спи, род - ной! Ба-юш-ки, ба - ю,

The composer's choice of the lullaby genre is not accidental: it cuts through the world of madness in its passionately destructive rush of

love and takes Marie back to the primordial origins of charitable love. In the very act of cradling the deceased Andrei, the eternal feminine, gentle, soothing, bringing him to a perfect state of peace, that beginning that was previously deeply hidden in his soul and only revealed itself in madness, awakens in the heroine. The conceptual meaning of the lullaby is linked to a multifaceted semantic orbit that draws in images of home and family, spiritual purity and chastity, gentleness, maternal love, and inner harmony.<sup>[20]</sup> The lullaby, one of the oldest ceremonial genres, <sup>[21]</sup> fulfils a purifying function, extending the scenic space of the personal drama to the macrocosm, to the limits that are in contact with original and authentic spiritual values.

In the lullaby, Maria 'buries' not only Andrei's soul, but also his love. Maria's song also makes up for the absence of love leitmotifs in the opera, symbolising the image of the pure, forgiving maternal love that the protagonist was never destined to taste, the love that is stronger than death.

Following the logic of the plot, the lullaby has yet another value in the opera. Marie, in her madness, cannot pray for the repose of the soul of the young Cossack, whom she takes for her baby. So, it is the lullaby that, in this context, plays the role of a prayer for rest, as if rising above the situation of death. In fact, the monotonous rhythm of the song is perceived as a prayer, an incantation. The semantics of the lyrics of the considerable number of lullaby parallels with the motifs of death and sleep, as well as the proximity to the lamentable genre, which is particularly evident in the improvised manner of the interpretation and in the intonatory characteristics of the 'dodo' refrain.

Thus, the concept of Love in the literary text of *Mazeppa* is closely linked to the concept of Death, which has deep spiritual and philosophical foundations. Love and death are the main axes of existence, the eternal constants of the universe, which are the subject not only of religious and philosophical discourses, but also of artistic ones.



Tchaikovsky's concept of Death in this opera is linked to that of Rest – it is a complex, multi-layered, multi-component whole woven from many heterogeneous layers, and it is therefore justified to speak of his score of stillness in the finale. Nevertheless, Mazeppa's finale is seen as an overcoming of dark ideas about the catastrophe of existence and death. In the context of the opera, we can feel Tchaikovsky's intense passion for life.

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[\[1\]](#) Michail Bachtin. Dostoevsky. Poetics and Stylistics. Einaudi (2002), 356.

[\[2\]](#) The idea that a work of art contains a certain 'artistic code' that must be understood is described in detail by Jurij Lotman The

Structure of the Artistic Text (Michigan Slavic Contributions No. 7) Paperback – January 1, 1977, University of Michigan (January 1, 1977), 300.

[3] The term concept was virtually unknown in French until the end of the 19th century, and only applied to philosophy: it is not found in belles-lettres. In philosophical works, it has been present since Durkheim and Poincaré.

[4] D. Likhachev's term for a set of concepts.

[5] Brown D. *Tchaikovsky; A Biographical and Critical Study*. Vol. 1. - The early years (1840-1874). London, Victor Gollanch Ltd., 1978. – 348 p.

[6] Laroche G.A. Selected articles. – Vol. 2.-L.: Music, 1975, 264.

[7] It is worth mentioning that the performance scene from *Mazeppa*, written by Tchaikovsky in a very realistic manner, has not by chance been associated by many musicologists with high-profile socio-political events of which the composer was a contemporary. Suffice it to recall the appalling statistics according to which the last third of the 19th century saw the peak of executions in Russia. The government was reacting to the revolutionary terror, which had reached an unprecedented scale at the time.

[8] Tchaikovsky P.I. Complete Works. T. 38. *Mazepa*. Arr. for Singing with piano. Moscow, Musica, 1968, 256- 257.

[9] Asafiev B.V. *Tchaikovsky's operas* / B.V. Asafiev. Symphonic etudes. Leningrad, Music, 1970, 144.

[10] In the Romantic tradition, the brass instruments playing with the piano symbolise a service for the dead.

[11] Nicolas Berdyaev's term

[12] Epistle to the Romans, chapter 6, verse 23

[13] Nicolas Berdyaev. *The Destiny of Man*. Semantron Press, 2009, 328 p.

[14] Ibid, p. 219.

[15] Ibid, p.217.

[16] Tchaikovsky P.I. *Complete Works*. T. 38. Mazepa. Arrangments for Singing with piano. – Moscow, Musica, 1968, 287.

[17] Ibid, 290.

[18] Annette Giesecke. *Classical Mythology A to Z: An Encyclopedia of Gods & Goddesses, Heroes & Heroines, Nymphs, Spirits, Monsters, and Places*, Black Dog & Leventhal, 2020, 376.

[19] Nicolas Berdyaev. *Self-Knowledge: An Essay in Autobiography*. Semantron Press, 2009, 360 p.

[20] Maria sees Andrei as a small child personifying a new life. In the Moscow Helikon Opera's 2020 production, Maria appears at the end of the opera when she sings a lullaby in D flat major to the woman with the rounded belly, dedicating it to her unborn child.

[21] The two most important songs in everyone's life are the lullaby and the funeral song.