Death Speaks Russian: Heteroglossia and Dialogical Tonality in Musorgsky’s “Serenade” from Songs and Dances of Death

by Petros Vouvaris

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Abstract: Composed in the mid 1870’s, Modest Musorgsky’s song cycle Songs and Dances of Death can be easily placed within the geographically and temporally situated cultural and sociopolitical context of the subject matter of dying that thematically unifies it. The article focuses on the set’s second song, titled “Serenade,” seeking to investigate the structural conditions that afford its hermeneutic association with this context. To do so, it borrows its critical apparatus from Mikhail Bakhtin’s literary theory, and particularly the notions of heteroglossia and dialogism, intersected with the concept of markedness, as it has been appropriated to musicology from structural linguistics by Robert Hatten. The analysis demonstrates the song’s heteroglot disposition, evinced by the stylistic opposition of its two comprising sections, the first unmarked and the second marked by readily identifiable tokens of Russianness. In particular, it concentrates on the song’s tonal duality, re-conceptualizing it in terms of what per Bakhtin could be described as dialogical tonality. In this respect, the tonal ambiguity of the song’s harmonic macro-structure is mapped onto the simultaneous yet incommensurable perspectives that define its poetic narrative, allowing for the interpretation of the song’s cultural import as an attempt at aestheticizing the ambivalent liminality of the act of dying.

Keywords: Musorgsky, Kuchkism, Heteroglossia, Directional Tonality, Tonal Mutability, Dialogism, Dialogical Tonality

Often considered Modest Musorgsky’s masterpiece in the song genre, Pesni i plyaski smerti [Songs and Dances of Death] is a set of four songs, written in the mid 1870’s, to poems by Arseny Golenishchev-Kutuzov, one of the composer’s closest friends at the
time. The set is thematically unified around the subject matter of dying, each song describing the demise of a different person: an infant ("Kolïbel'naya" [Lullaby], dated April 14, 1875), an adolescent girl ("Serenada" [Serenade], dated May 11, 1875), a drunken peasant ("Trepak," dated February 17, 1875), and an army of troops ("Polkovodets" [The Commander], dated June 5, 1877). However, it is well documented that Musorgsky and Kutuzov, prompted by art critic Vladimir Stasov, envisioned a song cycle with a much larger number of songs and thus a much wider array of different musico-poetic perspectives on death. This evidence sets in relief the fundamental idea thematized by the eventual collection as a whole, namely, that death comes to everyone, irrespective of their station in life. This idea is, of course, neither indigenous to the cultural landscape of 19th-century Russia, nor without precedent, dating as far back as the tradition of pictorial Totentanz cycles in medieval and renaissance Europe (e.g. the famous early 16th-century woodcuts of Hans Holbein). Nonetheless, the idea of death’s egalitarian character acquired a special sociopolitical


significance in late 19th-century Russia, after the ascent of Tsar Alexander II in 1855 and the reforms he instituted (e.g. the Emancipation Edict of 1861 that effectively granted freedom from serfdom to more than twenty-three million subjects of imperial Russia). From this perspective, if speaking the name of death is enough to summon it into one’s life, as the widespread folklore belief in naklikanie would have it, Musorgsky’s song cycle may be thought to register an appeal for an egalitarian society that transcends classes and societal differences.

Another aspect of death as cultural construct in late 19th-century Russia pertains to its aestheticization within the context of the deepening decadentism of Russian culture. According to Anna Piotrowska, in the 1870’s the Russian intelligentsia was “sinking into decadency and hopelessness, mysticism coupled with an overt anti-urbanism, […] while the aestheticism of realism affected the perception of the world as flashbacks of bleak and monotonous landscapes.”

In literature, in particular, the growing fascination of Russian writers with illness and death mirrored the “bountiful harvest of death” in late 19th-century Russia and especially St. Petersburg. What is more, their preoccupation with death was sociopolitically aligned with empathizing for the oppressed and identifying with the underdog. In this context, Musorgsky’s much-cited alcoholism was not only a “personal weakness,” but also a typical behavioral pattern “for that part of Musorgsky’s generation that wanted to oppose the establishment and express its desperate protest through extreme forms of behavior.”

One contemporary notes: “An intense worship of Bacchus was considered to be almost obligatory for a writer of that period […] It was a showing-off, a ‘pose,’ for the best people of the [eighteen]-sixties.” Another writes: “Talented people in Russia who love the simple folk cannot but drink.” Drinking day and night at the Maly Yaroslavets, a disreputable tavern in St. Petersburg, Musorgsky joined other bohemian pariahs in idealizing alcoholism as an act of “ethical and even aesthetic opposition,” an act that, in fact, amounted to “little more than a course toward isolation and eventual self-destruction.” It should be noted that, on a more personal level, the dance of death had already been closing in on Musorgsky around the time he started composing the

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11 Ibid.
12 Ibid.
four songs: from the summer of 1873 to the summer of 1874 he was devastated by the deaths of two of his closest friends, the painter Victor Hartman and his beloved Nadezhda Opochinina. In a letter to Vladimir Stasov on August 2, 1874, he notes:

No, one cannot and must not be comforted, there can be and must be no consolation –it is a rotten mortality! If Nature is only coquetting with men, I shall have the honor of treating her like a coquette –that is, of trusting her as little as possible, keeping all my senses about me, when she tries to cheat me into taking the sky for a fiddlestick– or ought one, rather, like a brave soldier, to charge into the thick of life, have one’s fling and go under? What does it all mean? In any case the dull old earth is no coquette but takes every “King of Nature” straight into her loathsome embrace, whoever he is –like an old worn-out hag, for whom anyone is good enough, since she has no choice.

It is worth noting that Musorgsky used the word “Ona” (“She” in Russian) to refer to the song cycle Songs and Dances of Death, implicitly alluding to the popular personification of death in Russian culture as an old woman.

The preceding discussion describes succinctly the rich and, at times, contradictory semantic field weaved around the concept of death in late 19th-century Russia: death as a plea for social equality, as an act of political defiance, as a cultural synecdoche for artistic avant-gardism, as the abhorred inevitability of a Real intrusion that threatens the subject with an unfathomable Symbolic vacuumsing (as Jacques Lacan would have it). The question that the present study intends to address is how Musorgsky’s Songs and Dances of Death fits this multivalent sociocultural, ideological, and biographical backdrop. More specifically, it paradigmatically focuses on “Serenade,” the second song of the set, seeking to investigate the structural conditions which afford its interpretation as a cultural product that both reflects and affects the culture that makes it possible. To do so, I will rely on the conceptual framework of Mikhail Bakhtin’s literary theory, and particularly on the notions of “heteroglossia” and “dialogism,” intersected with Edwin Battistella’s theory of “markedness,” as it has been appropriated to musicology by Robert Hatten.

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Table 1
“Serenade” by Arseny Golenishchev-Kutuzov.\textsuperscript{18}

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 1</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Serenada</strong></td>
<td><strong>Serenade</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nega volshebnaya, noch’ golubaya,</td>
<td>Magical bliss, the pale blue night,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trepethnyi sumrak vesni;</td>
<td>The trembling twilight of spring…</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vnenlet, poniknuv golovkoy, bol’naya</td>
<td>The sick maiden listens, bowing her head…</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shyopot nochnoy tishini.</td>
<td>To the whispering of the nocturnal silence.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Son ne smikeyt blyestchyie ochi,</td>
<td>Sleep does not cover her shining eyes,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Zhizn’ k naslazhden’yu zovot,</td>
<td>Life summons her to pleasure;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A pod okoshkom v molchanii noch</td>
<td>Under the window in the silence of the night</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Smert’ serenadu poyot:</td>
<td>Death sings her a serenade:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“V mrake nevoli surovoy i tesnoy</td>
<td>“In the gloom of captivity, harsh and oppressive,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Molodost’ vyanet tvoya.</td>
<td>Your youthfulness withers away;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ritsar’ nevedomy, siloy chudesnoy</td>
<td>I, the knight with miraculous powers,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Osvobozhu ya tebya.</td>
<td>I will free you.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vstan’, posmotri na sebya: krasotoyu</td>
<td>Arise and look at yourself:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lik tvoy prorozchnoy blestit,</td>
<td>Your transparent visage glows with beauty,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shchyoki rumyani, volnistoy kosoyu</td>
<td>Your cheeks flushed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stan tvoy, kak tuchey, obvit.</td>
<td>A long wavy braid entwined your body as if surrounded by a cloud.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pristal’nikh glaz goluboye siyan’ye</td>
<td>The azure gleam of your staring eyes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yarche nebes i ognya,</td>
<td>Is brighter than the heavens fire.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Znoyem poludennym veyet dikan’ye, –</td>
<td>Your breath is like a heat of noonday, –</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ti obol’stila menya!</td>
<td>You have seduced me!</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Slukh tvoy plenilsya moyey serenadoy,</td>
<td>You have been captivated by my serenade,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ritsarya shyopot tvoy zval…</td>
<td>Your whispering voice summoned the knight.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ritsar’ prishyol za bestsennoy nagradoy;</td>
<td>The knight has come for his final reward</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chas upoyenyat nastal!”</td>
<td>The hour of capture has arrived!”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nezhen tvoy stan, upoitlen trepet.</td>
<td>Your body is sweet, your trembling intoxicating.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>O, zadushu ya tebya v krepkikh</td>
<td>Oh, I will suffocate you on my fast embraces;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ob’yat’yakh;</td>
<td>Hear my murmuring of love…</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lyubovnyi moy lepet slushay…</td>
<td>Be still… You are mine!”</td>
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</tbody>
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Example 1

“Serenade,” opening of the first section, m. 1–12.\textsuperscript{19}

\textsuperscript{19} Modest Musorgsky, \textit{Complete Collected Works}, vol. 5, series 9, ed. Pavel Lamm (Moscow: Muzgiz, 1931), 12.
Kutuzov’s poem (see Table 1) adheres to the well-established trope of dying as an erotic act, already familiar from such musico-poetic precedents as Schubert’s & Claudius’s *Der Tod und das Mädchen*: “The girl rises from her bed with shining eyes and calls out softly to her lover; she descends the staircase, goes out to him, and perishes in the *petite mort* of his embrace.” A distinct divergence from the relevant cultural norm is that the girl, this time, is a mute character; the song’s textual space is

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20 Ibid., 15.

21 Walsh, *Musorgsky and his Circle*, 335.
completely taken over by the unidentified narrator and death personified as a knight. The voices of these two agents are clearly delineated into two distinct sections: the first one is occupied by the narrator setting the scene (hence its habitual description as an introduction)\textsuperscript{22} and the second one by death serenading the young girl. Each section is furnished with its own distinct music, i.e. its own idiomatic melodic content, its own rhythmic, metric, and agogic profile, its own textural fabric, and, more importantly for the purposes of the present paper, its own tonal and harmonic framework (see Examples 1 and 2 respectively). Indeed, one of the song’s most notable structural features pertains to the fact that its first section gravitates tonally towards E minor, while the second one a semitone down towards E-flat minor. The closing of the song in a tonality different from the one in which it begins makes programmatic sense, given the song’s poetic narrative: the irreversibility of death makes any return impossible.\textsuperscript{23}

What this differing music contributes to the hermeneutic possibilities of the song’s interpretation is something that poetic discourse by itself is hard to attain and may be described as what Bakhtin’s terms “raznorečie” [heteroglossia].\textsuperscript{24}

According to Bakhtin, we all partake in a verbal culture, shared among the members of the society we belong to. This means that we do not use language as an abstract closed system, a pool of linguistic elements that we simply arrange by following some innate syntactic norms in order to accommodate our communicative purposes. Instead, in almost every utterance, we adopt multiple discourse practices that dynamically constitute our shared verbal culture.\textsuperscript{25} From this perspective, “language is something that is historically real, a process of heteroglot development, a process teeming with future and former languages, with prim but moribund aristocrat-languages, with parvenu-languages and with countless pretenders to the status of language which are all more or less successful, depending on their degree of social scope and on the ideological area in which they are employed.”\textsuperscript{26} For Bakhtin, the idea of a “unitary and singular ‘own’ language” (“monoglossia”) is in fact a reified illusion that suppresses the conflict-ridden social collage that actually defines our means of communication (“polyglossia” or “heteroglossia”).\textsuperscript{27} In terms of literary forms more akin to this conception of language, Bakhtin argues that it is the modern novel and not

\textsuperscript{22} For example, see David Brown, \textit{Musorgsky: His Life and Works} (Oxford & New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 291.

\textsuperscript{23} This is what Michel-Dimitri Calvocoressi probably means when he says that “[a] return to the opening key would have been thoroughly inappropriate.” \textit{Modest Mussorgsky: His Life and Works} (Fair Lawn, NJ: Essential Books, 1956), 294.

\textsuperscript{24} Bakhtin, \textit{The Dialogic Imagination}, 263.


\textsuperscript{26} Bakhtin, \textit{The Dialogic Imagination}, 356–57.

\textsuperscript{27} \textit{Ibid.}, 269.
poetry that is best suited for the exploitation of heteroglossia. He maintains that the power of the novel stems from its disposition to allow the coexistence, conflictual at times, of different speech types, organized as “a diversity of individual voices, artistically organized” (e.g. the voice of the novel’s characters, the voice of the narrator, the voice of the author).\(^{28}\) Hence his definition of heteroglossia as “another’s speech in another’s language, serving to express authorial intentions but in a refracted way.”\(^ {29}\) Quite pertinently to the scope of the present study, Bakhtin draws an analogy between textual heteroglossia and musical polyphony:

The essence of polyphony lies precisely in the fact that the voices remain independent and, as such, are combined in a unity of a higher order than in homophony. If one is to talk about individual will, then it is precisely in polyphony that a combination of several individual wills takes place, that the boundaries of the individual will can be in principle exceeded. One could put it this way: the artistic will of polyphony is a will to combine many wills, a will to the event.\(^ {30}\)

From the perspective of the novel metaphorized as a musical score, it is up to the author to either enhance or attenuate the comprehensibility of its polyphonic textural fabric by either “orchestrating” the constitutive (plot) lines of the novel or transcribing them for the “piano keyboard” respectively.\(^ {31}\)

Embracing music’s textuality on the basis of the linguality and communicability of the aesthetic experience, as advocated by Paul Ricoeur,\(^ {32}\) the applicability of the notion of heteroglossia may be extended so as to cover the musical discourse of Musorgsky’s “Serenade” as well. As a matter of fact, the stylistically divergent musical dialects of the two clearly articulated sections of the song encourage the assumption of two different coexistent points of view within the composer’s authorial voice: that of the narrator and that of death personified. In this respect, the music stresses the narrative rather than the lyrical aspect of the poetic text, drawing it closer to the novelistic pole of the literary spectrum.\(^ {33}\) What is more, the two sections are construed not simply as

\(^{28}\) Ibid., 262.  
\(^{29}\) Ibid., 324.  
\(^{30}\) Bakhtin, Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics, 21.  
\(^{31}\) Bakhtin, The Dialogic Imagination, 263.  
\(^{33}\) Appropriately, David Brown characterizes of all four songs of the cycle as “species of drama.” Musorgsky, 290.
different in relation to the disposition and treatment of their musical structural features, but as oppositional with respect to the relative “markedness” of their heteroglot disposition.

Adopted to musicology from structural linguistics, “markedness” is simply defined by Hatten as “valuation given to difference.” According to David Lidov’s foreword to Hatten’s book, “markedness theory proposes that wherever humans draw distinctions (right/left, man/woman, etc.) these tend to be asymmetrical: One side tends to be more richly evaluated (positively or negatively) and more special [marked]; the other, to lend itself more to abstraction and sometimes to represent the divided whole [unmarked].” The opposition described by Lidov is characterized as “privative” (presence of element A vs. absence of element A): we tend to use the unmarked term whenever A is not relevant to our communicative purposes or whenever we expressly want to include it. In the case of Musorgsky’s “Serenade,” the privative opposition between the two sections rests on the basis of the second section being marked by readily identifiable tokens of Russianness, absent in the first, unmarked one. This is not a conjectural inference, given that the informed listener may easily draw referential expectancies from the song’s contextual frame, as it pertains to the composer being a prime representative of the “moguchaia kuchka” or “mighty handful,” the group of Russian composers who championed a nationalistic approach to composing music with respect to both its subject matter and its style. Concerning the former, they showed a clear preference for programmatic genres, such as opera, song, and symphonic poem, possibly due to their ability to function narratively in a more direct and effective way. Concerning the latter, they advocated a decisive turn to the musical tradition of Russian folklore as an act of resistance against the dominance of imported European music and musicians in the Russian musical landscape. Along these lines, they openly opposed the sterile academism upheld by such institutions as the Conservatory and the Russian Musical Society, advocating, instead, “a vague kind of musical ‘realism,’ an idea most fully realized in the works of Musorgsky, surely the most naturally gifted of the five.”

Musorgsky was probably the most fervent supporter of the kuchkist agenda. According to Gerald Abraham, his aesthetic entailed:

34 Hatten, *Musical Meaning*, 34.

35 Ibid., x. Hatten offers as an example the word “bull,” which is the marked correlate of the unmarked term “cow” with respect to the distinction of gender. *Musical Meaning*, 34.

36 Ibid., 34.

37 Apart from Musorgsky, the group included Alexander Borodin, Mily Balakirev, César Cui, and. In his memoirs, Rimsky-Korsakov refers to the group as the “Balakirev circle,” occasionally using the term “moguchaia kuchka” with an ironic tone. *Chronicle of My Musical Life* (New York: Knopf, 1923).

[A] disdain for formal beauty and technical polish and every other manifestation of “art for art’s sake”; the desire to relate his art as closely as possible to life, especially to that of the Russian masses; to nourish his art on events and in turn to employ it as a medium for communicating human experience; and a somewhat self-conscious and aggressive Russianness and an intense sympathy with the Russian peasant, newly freed from serfdom.39

Structural elements that attest to this aesthetic orientation in the second section of “Serenade” include the dance-like siciliana rhythmic and metric profile, the homophonic texture with elements of heterophony, the short repetitive phrases, the occasional harmonic leaning towards the Aeolian, and the frequent E-flat/G-flat shifting of the melody’s referential center in resemblance to the structure of a modally mutable folk tune (see Example 2). It should be noted that tonal mutability has been considered one of the trademark features of kuchkism, given its frequent association with what Boleslav Iavorskiĭ and Sergei Protopopov have theorized as “mutable modes” of Russian folk and church music.40

Another kuchkist feature of Musorgsky’s idiomatic compositional technique, also prevalent in the song’s second section, relates to his preoccupation with the human speech and with the ways in which music could mirror its intonations and inflections. In a letter to Rimsky-Korsakov, dated July 30, 1868, he wrote: “Whatever speech I hear, whoever is speaking (or, the main thing, no matter what he is saying), my brain is already churning out the musical embodiment of such speech.”41 In fact, reproducing the nuances of human speech, and particularly Russian peasant speech, was what primarily characterized his personal take on the aesthetics of realism. It is well documented that Musorgsky was influenced by the writings of literary scholar Georg Gottfried Gervinus, who maintained that one of the three available types of spoken accent, the “pathetic or affective accent,” can only be understood by the speaker’s inflection and can only be visually represented through musical notation.42 In line with these claims, Musorgsky insisted on writing in a quasi-recitative manner that observed


41 Taruskin, Musorgsky, 80.

42 Ibid., 77.
the ordinary inflections of the Russian language. At the same time, he tailored his rhythmomelodic construction so as to match the spoken words as closely as possible, and he persistently avoided melismatic writing or melodic intervals larger than a fifth. In “Serenade,” this is felt particularly at the end of the song (see Example 3): the melodic flow is continuously hindered by gasps of increasingly larger duration that cut the vocal line into irregularly fragmented short phrases; the contour of each melodic fragment is erratic; the rhythmic and metric disposition of the pitch material approximates the flow of prosaic speech; the gradually lower dynamics reduce the singing voice to a whisper, pushing the performance of the penultimate phrase on “Be still” onto the verge of *sprechstimme*. If death does indeed speak, then he speaks Russian.

Example 3

“Serenade,” closing, m. 99–112.44

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But then what is the discursive import of the narrator’s speech in the first section, unmarked by the kuchkist tokens of Russianness in the second? A reductive analysis shows that it is entirely built on dominant harmony (in the context of e minor tonality), extensively prolonged over a pedaled fifth scale degree in the bass through a series of linear techniques (see Diagram 1): the second scale degree F-sharp of the Urlinie moves linearly up to the 7th of V7 and then down to the leading tone D-sharp with a 5-zug (supported by a counterpoint of parallel 10ths) that weakly and transiently tonicizes iv (A minor) in the course of its descent. A diminished seventh chord, which participates in the static prolongation of the regained V7 of E minor through neighboring motion, is reinterpreted so as to attain the harmonic status of a weak dominant function, preceding the solidification of this function in the form of a V7 proper in the key of E-flat minor and the eventual articulation of the fifth scale degree of the reinstated Ursatz in the new key right at the beginning of the song’s second section. This is the decisive turning point that marks the downward semitonal shift from the first to the second tonal space, defining the tonal poles that frame what has been theorized as
“directional,” “dual,” or “progressive tonality.” In fact, it is a turning point that feels a lot like resolution. If that is the case, then retrospectively the preceding section is charged with some sort of negative valence: dissonance, instability, ambiguity, tentativeness.

Diagram 2

Alternative interpretation of the large-scale harmonic and contrapuntal structure of “Serenade,” m. 1–34.

A structural interpretation that abides by this reading pertains to the reinterpretation of the prolonged V/ of E minor as a German augmented-sixth chord for the key of E-flat minor (see Diagram 2). I hasten to point out the dashed lines that denote the associational rather than prolongational aspect of this interpretation (a decision that both acknowledges the problematics of dissonant prolongation and honors the retrospective aspect of the aforementioned reading). Also, it is important to note that my interpretation does not encourage the two staves to be read as alternative, but as coincident, even though incommensurable, possibilities. In this respect, it does not aim at neutralizing the acknowledged tension that informs the song’s large-scale harmonic and contrapuntal structure under the normalizing effect of an all-encompassing sense of structural unity and coherence. Instead, it tries to grasp the duality of meaning that

45 For an overview of these concepts, see William Kinderman and Harald Krebs eds., The Second Practice of Nineteenth-Century Tonality (Lincoln, NE and London: University of Nebraska Press, 1996).

accounts for the negative valence of the opening section, retrospectively felt the minute the aforesaid turning point challenges the status of the opening tonality as an unambiguous and stable tonal space. Thus, we may perceive the two tonal spaces that frame the song not as consecutive, but as confluent, which means that we might as well be speaking not of “directional tonality,” but of “dialogical tonality.”

The term “dialogizm” [dialogism] is another Bakhtinian neologism used to “denote the quality of an instance of discourse that explicitly acknowledges that it is defined by its relationship to other instances, both past, to which it responds, and future, whose response it anticipates.”47 It refers to a worldview that acknowledges the confluence of many, often incommensurable voices, each expressing a different yet equally valid standpoint. Truth does not reside in collapsing the incompatibility of these standpoints into a unified perspective (as Hegelian dialectics would have it), but in the interfraction of their multiplicity. In Andrew Robinson’s words, “[t]here is no single meaning to be found in the world, but a vast multitude of contesting meanings. Truth is established by addressivity, engagement, and commitment in a particular context.”48

Inasmuch as dialogism is “the characteristic epistemological mode of a world dominated by heteroglossia,”49 its preferred literary domain is that of the polyphonic novel, constituted as a “dialogue among unmerged souls or perspectives.”50 In the case of Musorgsky’s heteroglot “Serenade,” the absence of a singular vantage point is mapped onto the absence of a single totalizing tonal purview. Conversely, the simultaneous validity of two tonal spaces in dissonant semitonal relation to each other reciprocates the coexistence of two different perspectives, irreducible to unity. After all, the two narrative units of the poem, corresponding to the two sections of the song, do not take place consecutively, but concurrently along the temporal trajectory of one, yet not singular scene that ends right when the ailing maiden succumbs to the lure of death.51 In this sense, it is not difficult to interpretively associate the ambiguous duality of the song’s world to the liminal space of dying, the space allotted to the moribund as she straddles the unmarked territory between the world of the living and the world of the dead. Interestingly enough, this liminal state seems to be unbeknownst to the girl, who experiences it in mute up until the moment it expires. It is the liminality of dying rather than the irreversible, almost totalitarian finality of death that appears to be the subject matter of Musorgsky’s “Serenade,” if not that of his entire Songs and Dances of


49 Bakhtin, The Dialogic Imagination, 426.

50 Robinson, “In Theory.”

51 On that account, the frequent characterization of the first section of the song as introduction seems unfounded.
Death: it arrests the moment of dying and explodes it in time, inviting a plurality of semantic possibilities to fill up the void of its aporia.

Reference List


**Biography: Petros Vouvaris** is an Assistant Professor in Music Form and Analysis at the Department of Music Science and Art of the University of Macedonia, Greece and a member of the board of directors of the Hellenic Musicological Society. His research interests lie in music theory and analysis, musical hermeneutics, twentieth-century music (and particularly early musical modernism), and music theory pedagogy. He has presented papers at international conferences and have published in both Greek and international journals, as well as in collective volumes. His book *Introduction to the Formal Analysis of Tonal Music* (in Greek) was published in 2015.