



**Bulgakov's "Moonlight Sonata:"  
The Thematic Functions of Grand Opera and Lieder in The  
Master and Margarita**  
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**From the Writer**

Being a music theory student, the numerous musical allusions in Bulgakov's *The Master and Margarita* immediately struck me as I read the novel for class. But what I learned from the WR program was to pursue these personal connections through scholarly research, filling them out into an informed but original thesis. The varied references throughout the novel to both individual composers and general musical forms became keyword "launch pads" into the history and analysis of the western musical canon: I dug through crisp, never-broken spines and dusty scores trying to find the connection between Schubert, Berlioz, Stravinsky, Strauss, and the raucous Jazz scenes. Through class-given drafting deadlines, including initial brainstorming, detailed outlines, and multiple rough drafts, I was able to carve down the scope of my paper into a strong, unified commentary on Bulgakov's extraordinary novel.

After completing the paper for class, I continued my research into the composers at the center of my analysis. Hector Berlioz, as noted in my paper, was a prominent member of the French musical elite, entrenched through international criticism, instruction, and royally commissioned pieces. But interestingly, though Bulgakov uses him as a metaphor for artistic corruption, I discovered Berlioz personally resembled the "tortured Romantic artist" more prominently associated (in the novel) with Schubert. His musical philosophy was fervently expressionist, and he suffered critical misunderstanding in response to some of his most passionate works. Perhaps this further reflects the mobile roles of Bulgakov's musical allusions or could reveal another layer to his metaphors. I must concede, however, that Berlioz was not as clearly defined a member of the musical establishment Bulgakov spurns as my primary research concluded. I thoroughly enjoyed researching, writing, and editing for this paper. I hope it sparks further conversation about one of my favorite novels.

John Patrick Collins

## Introduction

Several articles have connected Mikhail Bulgakov's many musical allusions to the actual composers and compositions, exploring how these references influence and inform his masterpiece, *The Master and Margarita*. David Lowe traces the narrative transformation of the Faust legend from Goethe through Gounod's opera to Bulgakov's novel. Ksana Blank and Nadine Natov both invoke the similar artistic methods of Bulgakov and Igor Stravinsky and relate the novel to Stravinsky's suite *L'Historie du Soldat*, albeit with different conclusions. These sources are models for the analysis of musical influences on Bulgakov. However, their contributions illuminate interesting but minor aspects of the novel. I will attempt to analyze Bulgakov's allusions to Romantic European lyric music in their collective thematic functions at the heart of *The Master and Margarita*.

This analysis will have three argumentative threads. First, I will show how Bulgakov's allusions to Romantic lyric music define the politico-cultural environment of Moscow and its central moral conflict in the novel. His juxtaposition in the novel of two different genres and their respective composers is a metaphor for the opposing sides of this conflict: Grand Opera, represented principally by French composer Hector Berlioz, symbolizes the materialism and artistic corruption of Soviet cultural institutions; Lieder, represented by Austrian composer Franz Schubert, symbolizes the emotive individualism and intimacy of true artistic pursuit.

Second, I will show how Bulgakov transcribes this external conflict into the mind of Ivan Bezdomny. In conjunction with Matt F. Oja and Riitta H. Pittman's compelling if unconventional psychological interpretations of *The Master and Margarita*, I will argue that Ivan's mental breakdown is his attempt to confront the central question of the novel, "what is the moral course of action for an artist" in Soviet Russia (Oja 151)? His "truly schizophrenic" split into "two Ivans," and eventually into Ivan and Master (142), represents the now internal conflict of opposing moral forces symbolized by Grand Opera and Lieder.

Third, through examination of specific pieces of Grand Opera and Lieder, I will show Bulgakov's conflicting allusions also subtly share prominent themes and serve a common function through Ivan's madness. Specifically, Berlioz's opera *La Damnation de Faust* and Schubert's Lied cycle *Winterreise* explore themes of visions, distressed solitude, supernatural occurrences, and dreams and sleep. These themes are also Bulgakov's motifs for developing Ivan's schizophrenic episodes, so that Ivan's madness, ultimately the mechanism for resolving the two moral opposites previously characterized by Grand Opera and Lieder, has a direct relationship with actual pieces of Grand Opera and Lieder. Thus, Bulgakov's allusions to Grand Opera and Lieder function dually as symbolic reflections of the source *and* resolution of the central moral question in *The Master and Margarita*.

## Grand Opera and Lieder Thematically Opposed

Before analyzing the complex roles of Bulgakov's allusions to Grand Opera and Lieder, it is necessary to define the musical genres as context for the argument.

I adopt definitions from Grove Music Online: Grand Opera is “French opera of the Romantic period, sung throughout, generally in five acts, grandiose in conception and impressively staged” (Bartlet, M., Elizabeth, C.); Romantic Lieder is “the German vernacular song developed into an art form in which musical ideas suggested by words were embodied in the setting of those words for voice and piano” (Boker-heil, Norbert, et al.). These definitions are minimal, but identify basic characteristics. As my paper progresses, the musical and social qualities of Grand Opera and Lieder will be further explored in their applications in *The Master and Margarita*.

Grand Opera’s contaminated role in France during the early Romantic era mirrors the descriptions of Soviet artistic institutions in Bulgakov’s novel. Jane F. Fulcher details the political relationship between Grand Opera and the French government in her book *The Nation’s Image*, revealing that “an official Commission, representative of the state, designed to protect its interests” oversaw all executive decisions at the Paris Opera House, “a fact that was to be decisive for the development of the repertoire” (55). This political contamination of the arts can be seen explicitly in the bureaucratic censorship of Bulgakov’s MASSOLIT: The novel opens as Berlioz, the chairman of this organization, rejects a poem he commissioned to champion Soviet atheism because he deems that it does not effectively adhere to that political agenda (Bulgakov 4–5). Fulcher mentions a second element of contamination, that Grand Opera “was now a matter of national symbolism as well as of financial interest” (63). The dominant financial motives in France correlate to the material purpose of Bulgakov’s Variety Theater: The man truly running the Variety is Rimsky, the financial director, who is first introduced with a safe at his side (Bulgakov 86). Chapter 17 details Vasily Stepanovich’s trouble with the very routine delivery of vast sums of money from the Variety to the overseeing Entertainment Commission (154-64). Bulgakov’s descriptions of the political corruption and materialism of Soviet artistic institutions overlap with the historical functions of Grand Opera.

Bulgakov’s character examples of artistic and political corruption tie these same leaders of Soviet institutions to prominent fixtures of Grand Opera, as described in *The Cambridge Companion to Grand Opera*. Mikhail Alexandrovich Berlioz directly alludes to Hector Berlioz, a leading composer and critic of Romantic French music. Hector Berlioz regularly composed pieces commissioned by the state, including several Grand Operas with nationalist overtones. Importantly in connection to Bulgakov’s Berlioz, Hector Berlioz was also an editor of a prominent musical journal and an author of an influential theoretical textbook on the grandiose orchestration typical of Grand Opera, *Grand Traité d’Instrumentation*. Grigory Danilovich Rimsky, the financial director of the Variety, also takes his name directly from an operatic composer. Nikolay Andreyevich Rimsky-Korsakov was active in a later Romantic period, but still composed nationalist operas in the epic style of Berlioz. These two examples personally symbolize Grand Opera’s political and financial overlap of art in the Soviet institutions. Nikanor Ivanovich Bosoi’s name resembles the Bolshoi Opera House in Moscow, which premiered operas by Rimsky and hosted tours of French Grand Opera. Bolshoi itself means “grand” in Russian, certainly an homage to the Parisian center of the operatic world at that time—it is interesting that the house committee chairman alludes to the “house” of Grand Opera in Russia. Through Bosoi, Bulgakov references the state corruption of art in nineteenth-century

France to further comment on the state corruption in the housing crisis in the USSR.

In addition to historical and individual characteristics, Bulgakov adopts the musical characteristics of Grand Opera to portray satirically certain Moscow chapters as scenes in an actual Grand Opera. In Grand Opera, marches represent the “chant national” or “a kinetic response to a political predicament” (Charlton 315). This musical style is used in the grotesque march that closes the Variety show, in which Woland skewers Soviet materialism, and George Bengalsky attempts to censor his act. The ballets of Grand Opera make a “close connection [to] prevailing social-dance customs” and are often “masked balls” (Charlton 103, 99). Bulgakov stages his rendition as Satan’s Grand Ball: Hellish members “danc[e]” to Strauss’s waltz, the scene “pulsating with rhythm” (Bulgakov 230). Berlioz (or at least his head) and a member of the Theatrical Commission are “invited” to this spectacle, equating their artistic and moral corruption to the long list of history’s condemned.

Perhaps the most essential musical component, the chorus “puts the ‘grand’ into Grand Opera” (Charlton 76). A sense of “the chorus” is constantly referenced throughout the novel, as dialogue is never spoken but “sung” in different vocal registers. The chorus was also a main political communicator: After a change in government, “the [French] nation’s foremost opera house already had a chorus in place ready to step to the footlights in new roles embodying the power of a people . . . to form an invincible state” (Fulcher 77). Bulgakov uses the strange, involuntary “chorus” of the Entertainment Commission to satirize the political and material corruption of Soviet artistic institutions (Bulgakov 160–63). Bulgakov’s allusions to the function, figures, and musical characteristics of Grand Opera highlight the political corruption, materialism, and artistic compromise of Soviet cultural institutions.

In direct contrast, Bulgakov’s allusions to Lieder highlight his artistic and moral ideals. During the Romantic era, Lieder is in many ways the opposite genre of Grand Opera. Musically, its succinct length and minimalist accompaniment contrast the indulgent five acts and grandiose orchestration of Grand Opera. The solo voice is juxtaposed against the chorus. Theoretically, Lieder serves a primarily emotional function, as a conversation between poetry and music; while, as I have shown, Grand Opera serves social and political goals. A Lied was performed privately in the home, while Grand Opera was staged in decadent state-funded opera houses with a charged admission. These differences with Grand Opera imply Lieder allusions represent artistic and moral opposition to the Soviet institutions.

The allusion to Schubert introduces Lieder as the representation of artistic and moral ideals. Schubert is the archetypal composer and symbol of Lieder, and his reference brings to mind his principal musical pursuit. Schubert’s Lieder are primarily identified by their strong emotional power—his pieces create an “interior stage . . . in the sanctuary of self” (Parsons 21). The goal of his music was not to parlay the current political temperament, but to explore the internal range of emotion in episode dramas of love and sorrow. Musically, Schubert’s Lieder have “harmonic audaciousness,” which “may have struck listeners in Schubert’s day as wildly revolutionary” (Parsons 21). This shows Schubert was not catering to any audience, but writing his music for purely artistic reasons. It

is important within the context of artists in *The Master and Margarita* that, despite being politically “subjected to stringent censorship[,] . . . self-assured resistance to authority is sounded” in multiple Schubert Lieder (Parsons 97). Through his music, Schubert strove for personal and political freedom. Bulgakov’s decision to name him as a main symbol of the Master’s refuge, awarded in Chapter 32, casts Schubert’s musical practices as a higher example than the Grand Opera allusions of Moscow.

The Master is Bulgakov’s “living Schubert,” embodying characteristics noted above. Mirroring Schubert’s principal practice in music, the Master explores the volatile internal emotions of Pontius Pilate in literature. His rewriting of the Gospels, most drastically in his approach to Jesus, is artistically innovative. While the Master does not fight his censorship and persecution outside of his art, his novel does reproach authority and its negative effects, both in Yeshua’s philosophical hearing with Pilate and in the tragic result of Rome’s political policies (Bulgakov 22, 24). His connection to Schubert spreads Bulgakov’s isolated reference to the moral and artistic ideals of Lieder throughout the rest of the novel. These Lieder allusions reveal the novel’s ideals of personal freedom and expression. Thus, Grand Opera and Lieder allusions represent the opposing sides of Bulgakov’s central morality play.

### **The Conflict of Grand Opera and Lieder on a Personal Plane**

But what is the venue for acting out this morality play? Oja and Pittman’s psychological argument is essentially an exploration of Ivan Bezdomny’s response to the novel’s moral and artistic conflict, defined above in terms of Bulgakov’s musical allusions. Both critics examine Bulgakov’s theme of madness quite literally, leading to interesting interpretations of chapter 11. Each asserts Ivan’s “split in two” is the development of schizophrenia. This begins with Woland, who “triggers in Ivan a revelation of the falseness of all the half-baked hypermaterialism” of MASSOLIT and his own writing (Oja 144). After running through Moscow in a dream-like hysteria, he is taken to Stravinsky’s clinic. Here Ivan progresses into madness: “At first Ivan talks to himself; then his monologue turns into a dialogue between the ‘old’ and ‘new’ Ivans; finally the Master’s entry completes the process of Ivan’s split” (Pittman 163). Creation of the Master, along with his life and literature, provides a necessary “alternative course for the writer faced by the morally repressive climate of the writer’s profession in 1930s Moscow” (Oja 145).

Ivan’s development of a “Doppelgänger” or “splinter psyche” creates dual personas assuming the external qualities of Grand Opera and Lieder internally (Oja 142, Pittman 163). The “old” and “new” personas represent the same moral and artistic roles symbolized by Grand Opera and Lieder:

The old Ivan, like Berlioz . . . represents the writer as hypocrite, the writer as sycophant, the writer as professional phony; whereas the Master represents the alternative, the writer as hero. This is the moral alternative Bezdomny recognizes, realizes, and adopts for himself (Oja 145).

When Ivan's mind uses these personas to explore the moral conflict on an imaginary level, allusions to Grand Opera and Lieder continue in much the same way, as signposts marking the proximity to corruption. During Margarita's "flight" in chapter 21, for example, she revels in a release from Moscow, causing destruction *en route* to the deep woods. But the freedom she declares is contingent upon her submission to the authority of Woland in the Grand Ball. Thus, the musical allusions in the woods are a frog's march and a ballet of mermaids and naked witches (Bulgakov 211), two elements of Grand Opera.

Within the Grand Ball, her strange immobility alludes to the Parisian operatic ballet "based on codified . . . positions, and sometimes copying Classical statues" (Charlton 98). Her nakedness also reflects sexual corruption of Grand Opera, as "ogling the danseuses at the Opera . . . was a favorite Parisian sport," encouraged to a point of prostitution by the theater (Charlton 99). Ivan creates the Master's life, already noted as an example of Lieder, with full adherence to Romantic ideals of isolation and torment in creation. After Ivan realizes the true nature of Moscow, his resulting psychological breakdown continues the opposition of Grand Opera and Lieder on a personal plane. Grand Opera and Lieder allusions function not only in defining the novel's central moral conflict externally, but also on a deeper, additional level in Ivan's dual-persona attempt to confront the problem internally.

### **Grand Opera and Lieder: Thematically and Functionally United**

In synthesizing through Ivan these strongly opposing symbols on a single individual (and thus shared) plane, Bulgakov hints at their underlying similarities and a second, common function. Violating the seemingly rigid roles of musical allusions in *The Master and Margarita*, Bulgakov's primary fixtures of Grand Opera and Lieder, Berlioz and Schubert respectively, historically overlap in notable ways. Schubert wrote *Fierrabras*, a Grand Opera, and Berlioz composed several *mélodies*, French interpretations of Lieder. Schubert's collections of Lieder consciously approach a unified dramatic narrative, much like an opera, and Berlioz's operas have arias explicitly in the style of Lied. Especially interesting in the context of *The Master and Margarita*, Schubert's first Lied set a section of Goethe's *Faust* to music, and Berlioz wrote an entire Grand Opera, *La Damnation de Faust*. These similarities, along with Bulgakov's decision to assign Berlioz and Schubert to be the primary symbols of Grand Opera and Lieder, prompt an examination of their actual works.

Berlioz's *La Damnation de Faust* and Schubert's Lied cycle *Winterreise* share prominent themes. Both Faust and Schubert's protagonists suffer from troubling visions. In scene 7 of Berlioz's Grand Opera, "Faust's Vision," gnomes and sylphs dance ballet for him before Mephistopheles appears. In Schubert's *Winterreise*, in which a young man wanders through the frozen woods after his heart is broken, two songs deal with visions. In "Der Lindenbaum" ("The Linden Tree"), the wanderer's favorite tree calls out for him to commit suicide. Another song, "Die Nebensonnen" ("The Mock Suns"), deals with a vision of three suns haunting the wanderer: two of them, the eyes of his lover, turn away forever. In a typically Romantic ideal, both Faust and the wanderer are tormented by distressed solitude. In scene 16, Faust languishes in the dark woods, invoking nature to

abate his piteous cries. For *Winterreise*, the entire cycle of Lieder follows the young man through his existential musings as he travels alone through the winter woods. The supernatural "will-o'-the-wisps" play prophetic roles for Margarita and the wanderer. A quartet of these folk spirits accompanies Mephistopheles' warnings of Margarita's future loss of Faust in scene 12. In "Irrlicht" ("Will-o'-the-Wisp"), the phantom lights have led the wanderer astray, which he interprets as a reflection of his pursuit of love. Dreams provide the setting of scenes for the two composers. In scene 7, Mephistopheles tempts Faust by lulling him to sleep and conjuring dreams of Margarita. The song "Frühlingstraum" ("Spring Dreams") is a yearning dream of love in springtime.

These shared elements show Bulgakov's allusions to Grand Opera and Lieder may be in conflict generally, but they are thematically united through his given examples.

Not coincidentally, Bulgakov uses these same thematic elements to develop Ivan's schizophrenia. Bulgakov develops the theme of visions into schizophrenic creation, a product of Ivan's distressed solitude at the clinic. All action within Ivan's imagined narrative is colored by the supernatural and usually heralded by dreams or dream-like states. Bulgakov's allusions to Grand Opera and Lieder are now operating on yet another level; They are functionally united as Bulgakov's thematic mechanisms.

Because of this important thematic and functional correlation with Ivan's schizophrenia, allusions to Grand Opera and Lieder are part of the resolution of Bulgakov's central moral question, "what is the moral course of action for an artist" in Soviet Russia (Oja 151)? The madness argument places Ivan as the central figure of the novel; he becomes Bulgakov's case study of the artist in Soviet Russia. His progression into madness is "a process that is eminently healthy and healing," helping Ivan make sense of his place within the damaging moral and artistic environment of Soviet Russia (Oja 149). The result of this madness is stability between the two opposing moral forces. According to Pittman: "Bulgakov conjures up his protagonists' suppressed or neglected 'shadow' lives and gives expression to a vision of potential unity," a balancing act that "represents a complex 'settling of accounts' . . . between the poet's life of imagination and enforced conformity" (Pittman 162, 166). Thus, through Ivan, Bulgakov presents not an answer, but a synthesis of true and forced functions of the artist in Soviet Russia. As is in all elements of *The Master and Margarita*, there is no simple, definitive answer. An artist must find a variable personal balance between independent and institutional creation. Bulgakov's complex layering of allusions to Grand Opera and Lieder mirrors this synthesis.

Ivan's epilogue also reasonably echoes this conclusion. Every spring moon he seems to relive his dualist madness. "Ivan Nikolayevich openly talks to himself" in Patriarch's Ponds, recreating his horrible realization of moral corruption; he then internally visits Nikolai Ivanovich, remembering a humorous tale from his moral escape in which he "knows what will happen next by heart" (Bulgakov 333). Bulgakov's curious reversal of first and patronymic names reinforces the dual nature of this experience. Continuing this motif, Ivan's full name in the epilogue is different. He is no longer Bezdomny, Russian for "homeless," but Professor Ponyryov. He has found his own psychological "home," mirroring the Master's "eternal home" Ivan visits in his vivid dreams (Bulgakov 325). Bulgakov



strengthens this connection by ending both chapter 32 and the epilogue with the same phrase. Bulgakov presents Ivan's synthesis as the goal of the ideal artist, although in the real world.

In conclusion, Bulgakov uses general, historical characteristics of Grand Opera and Lieder to illustrate the two external forces of his central moral question, "what is the moral course of action for an artist" in Soviet Russia (Oja 151)? Through Ivan Bezdomny's schizophrenic creation of the Master, the moral question is transcribed internally. In typical Bulgakovian irony, prominent examples of Berlioz's Grand Opera and Schubert's Lieder share thematic characteristics that Bulgakov uses to develop Ivan's madness. In this paradox, Bulgakov's chosen elements of Grand Opera and Lieder simultaneously resolve the moral and artistic opposites the two musical genres broadly symbolize.

This progression makes an additional musical allusion. Bulgakov's multi-layered symbolic application of Grand Opera and Lieder in the novel mirrors the harmonic structure of "sonata form," a principle classical music form used by almost every major composer. In sonata form, the piece of music is organized into three sections: the exposition, the development, and the recapitulation. In the exposition, two harmonic "theme groups" are presented in conflict; that is, they are in different keys. However, once the piece reaches the recapitulation, these same "theme groups" are restated, only now in harmony, or in the same key. This accomplishment synthesizes the two paradoxical functions of Grand Opera and Lieder in one final statement of music's relationship with the novel: Taken with his constant invocations of the moon, *The Master and Margarita* is Bulgakov's literary "Moonlight Sonata."

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