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Morton Marcus

THE MUSSORGSKY QUESTION

The Mussorgsky question is an intriguing one: Should he be taken seriously as a composer, or was he merely a talented dilettante? Balakirev said, "His brains are weak." Tchaikovsky considered him to be talented but concluded that "he has a narrow stature and lacks the need for self-perfection." Tolstoy dismissed him by saying, "I like neither talented drunks nor drunken talents!"

A heavysset man with a clown's red nose and eyes that seemed circled by charcoal, Mussorgsky was drunk much of the time and in the end lived in a single room strewn with plates of half-eaten food and empty vodka bottles.

No one knew, however, that Mussorgsky was Dostoyevsky's greatest creation. So great, he sprang from the novelist's pen full-grown-and very drunk-on a stormy night in 1839, when Dostoyevsky, dreaming of becoming a writer, was an eighteen-year-old student at the school of Military Engineering.

Yet over the next forty-one years, the author didn't know where to place Mussorgsky: he was too talented to play Sonya's father or any of the other drunks who stumble through the pages of Dostoyevsky's novels.

Nevertheless, die author never abandoned the idea of using Mussorgsky, but he put him out on the Nevsky Prospekt until he found a suitable part for him in one of his books.

As drunks will, Mussorgsky wandered away, bewildered by all the lights and jingling horse-drawn sleighs. He vaguely remembered that he was a minor clerk in the Department of Forestry and a former officer in the Preobrajensky Guards, but he didn't know how he came to be standing on that boulevard. Since he was a drunk, however, he went in search of the first tavern he could find to solve his confusion.

Like all Dostoyevsky characters, Mussorgsky was an idea surrounded by flesh and clothes, so single-minded and uncompromising, as ideas are, that he could never adjust to life. He had given up his army career to compose and lived only for music. Elegant, witty, perfumed and slim, he grew corpulent and shabby and would disappear for months on end, surfacing more disheveled and delirious than he had been before.

Periodically realizing that Mussorgsky was not where he had left him, Dostoyevsky would hunt him down and bring him home, making him wait in a straight-backed chair in front of his desk, while he sought a place for him in the novel he was currently writing. This would go on for weeks, Mussorgsky all the while sitting upright, licking his lips and looking moist-eyed around the room for bottles.

Other than physically, Mussorgsky was half-formed in every way, even in music, where his harmonies and structure were so "rough" and "wrong" they inspired Rimsky-Korsakov, Ravel and others to revise and rescore them in the forms we know them today, although how much of the music is theirs and how much is this stumbling phantom's, who may have existed only as an uncomfortable but thrilling thought in their conventional minds, we will never know.

Dostoyevsky never used Mussorgsky. Those other drunks, Marmeladov and Snegirov, were minor figures who functioned perfectly as victims; sufferers at the hands of others. But Mussorgsky-Mussorgsky was special: he had the soul of an artist, and this Dostoyevsky did not know how to handle. Possibly Mussorgsky was closer to Dostoyevsky's character than the novelist dared to understand.

With the creation of Ilushia's alcoholic father in *The Brothers Karamazov*, Dostoyevsky stopped trying to find a niche in his books for the composer. He put Mussorgsky on the boulevard and, shoving him forward, he withdrew for the last time.

Mussorgsky was more bewildered than ever. How was a character supposed to behave who was created for a book that was never written? How was he to function? What was he to do? We can appreciate these questions, dear Reader, since one way or another we ask them of ourselves almost every day.

In the end, Mussorgsky composed three operas and a handful of some cycles and tone poems. All are poorly written. No wonder many consider him a dabbler in music.

Composer or dilettante? Is that the Mussorgsky question? Or is it about the model who inspired others to be better than themselves by being so single-minded, so dedicated to his art that alcohol was the only other thing that had a place in his life? His commitment was so uncompromising that he could never be believable as a character in a novel, or for that matter as a human being.

The Brothers Karamazov was published in December, 1880. Dostoyevsky died of hemorrhaging lungs on January 28, 1881. Six weeks later, on March 16, Mussorgsky, enfeebled and suffering from delirium tremens for the previous two months, died of a stroke.

Both men are buried in the Alexander Nevsky Monastery.