Bratya, A Symphonic Poem

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BRATYA, A SYMPHONIC POEM

A Thesis

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Tamyka Jordon
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ABSTRACT

Bratya, ‘brothers’ in Russian, is a tone poem inspired by characters in Dostoevsky’s *The Brothers Karamazov*. The novel is long, complex, and largely considered the author’s magnum opus. I focus on each brother: Dmitri, Ivan, Smerdyakov, and Alexei. Each movement attempts to capture the essence and personality of each brother.

The first movement “Mitya”, a nickname for the eldest brother Dmitri, attempts to personify the character’s stormy, passionate nature. His strained relationship with his father, obsession with the siren-like Grushenka, and his general inability to control his emotions are largely to blame for Dmitri’s imprisonment. Specific traits and episodes that inspired Mitya’s include his military experience, the scene where he and Grushenka profess their mutual love, and his arrest for the murder of his father. Because he is a military man and frequent presence at the local bar, I like to imagine a slightly intoxicated Dmitri, dancing and laughing boisterously with his fellow officers, hence the Cossack dance (C-E). On the night of his arrest, Dmitri spots Grushenka and the two commit themselves to each other (E-F). Although Dmitri is innocent, the circumstantial evidence against him is overwhelming and he eventually lands in a labor camp in Siberia (G).

The second movement entitled “Ivan” is inspired by Ivan’s atheism, his inability to reconcile his own personal logic and reason with his desire to acknowledge a higher power, and ultimately his descent into madness. Dostoevsky is famous for writing characters who are burdened by guilt, real or imagined. Ivan is no exception. Ivan is horrified to discover Smerdyakov is responsible for the death of their father and that Smerdyakov was able to justify the murder with Ivan’s “there is no god, do what thou wilt” philosophy. On his journey home from that revelation, he manages to convince himself his own guilt is misplaced considering he technically did not do anything (A-E). Ironically, Ivan the atheist hallucinates Lucifer himself is in his bedroom casting him all the blame. This is apparently too much for Ivan who begins to lose touch with reality (E-G).
“Smerdyakov” is the title of the third movement and the “illegitimate” brother. He did not grow up with the patriarch Fyodor claiming him but everyone has a sneaking suspicion that he is Fyodor’s child. Smerdyakov’s rumored mother was a mentally challenged village girl cruelly nicknamed “Reeking Lizaveta”. Fyodor is said to have raped her in a drunken stupor and thus came Smerdyakov, which translates to “son of the reeking one”. Fyodor’s two loyal servants take the child in as their own, trying to instill some good in him despite his father. The attempt is fruitless as Smerdyakov is child who likes to feed nails to dogs and hang up dead cats. He also suffers from epilepsy. Smerdyakov, a devoted follower to Ivan, slyly makes certain that Ivan will be absent the night of the murder. He fakes a seizure, sealing his own alibi, and when the coast is clear, commits the murder. Thinking Ivan will be pleased to find that it was Ivan’s words that enabled him to commit the murder, he is devastated to find the opposite. Smerdyakov ultimately commits suicide, probably not out of guilt, but out of the pain of rejection from the one person he admired (A-D).

Alexei, lovingly called Alyosha, is the foil to all of his brothers. He is good, kind, non-judgmental, and genuinely loves his father despite his short comings. In the beginning of the novel Alexei is studying to become a priest. He is deeply spiritual and tries to help each character in whatever way he can. Although, Alexei is painted as the protagonist, nothing he does actually helps to move the action of the novel along. He is mainly a quiet bystander. At the novel’s conclusion in a scene that greatly resembles Jesus’s Sermon on the Mount, Alexei tells a group of young boys to be kind to one another. The sense that there can be redemption in this life permeates the end of the novel. The last movement is my imagining Alexei reflecting and making peace on all that has happened.
Bratya
Alexei
VITA

Tamyka Jordon is originally from Linden, Guyana, South America. She is a graduate of Southeastern University in Lakeland, Florida where she received a B.S. in Music Education in 2011. Tamyka began her studies at Louisiana State University in January of 2014. Her musical interests include the Russian composers of the nineteenth and early twentieth century, contemporary post-minimalism, and European folk music.