Alexandra Smith (University of Edinburgh).

“The Kreutzer Sonata, Sexual Morality and Music”.

Lev Tolstoy’s *The Kreutzer Sonata*, published more than a century ago, continues to exercise the attention from critics who tend to interpret the use of Ludwig van Beethoven’s music in this work in a variety of ways. While some scholars see Beethoven’s presence in Tolstoy’s works as a signifier of the unconscious, others argue that in *The Kreutzer Sonata* Beethoven’s sonata for piano and violin functions as a structural principle of the narrative to ensure a dialogue between the two signifying systems: the musical and the verbal. Several scholars became interested in the eroticism embodied in the plot lines of both narratives, and linked Tolstoy’s interpretation of Beethoven to the notion of modern marriage discussed in Tolstoy’s novella in relation to the new vision of sex and marriage after the 1861 Great Reform. Following the social reforms of the 1860s, the emergence of a new kind of sexual discourse connected with hygiene, medicine, education, criminality and demographic issues became visible both in literature and in the media. The present article will focus on Tolstoy’s reception of Beethoven and will argue that Tolstoy’s novella reflects the change in Russian attitudes to sex and marriage, and to the performance of Beethoven’s music in private and public spaces. I will discuss Tolstoy’s close bond with Beethoven in the context of the reception of his music in Russia in the 1830s-1900s. I will then analyse how Tolstoy’s understanding of Beethoven changed at the end of the 1880s and how the use of Beethoven’s music in *The Kreutzer Sonata* created new emotional communities. Not only did these communities convert to new truths through the act of collective reading and public discussions of Tolstoy’s novella before its actual publication, they also contributed to the new understanding of the inter-relationship between modernity and performance.

*The changing attitudes to sexuality and marriage in Russia.*

Maria Zalambani highlights the controversial treatment of sexuality and marriage in Tolstoy’s *The Kreutzer Sonata* and explains that the novella was published for the first time in 1891 in the thirteenth volume of Tolstoy’s collected works in accordance with the wishes of Sofia Andreevna Tolstaya (née Behrs) (1844-1919), Tolstoy’s devoted wife of nearly fifty years. Tolstoy’s idea to publish it initially in the literary journal *The Week (Nedelia)* without censors’ approval did not work out because he continued editing his novella. Yet, as Zalambani points out, the manuscript of the eighth version of the novella was circulated privately among Russian intellectuals. It triggered numerous discussions about modernity and family life. The submitted version of the novella for a volume dedicated to Tolstoy’s friend S.A. Iur’ev published in 1888 was not approved by the censors. Sofia’s Tolstaya’s attempt to publish it as part of Tolstoy’s *Collected Works* was not approved by the censors either. Due to her personal meeting with the tsar Alexander III in April 1891, Russian officials allowed her to publish it only as part of the *Collected Works*. The ban was lifted in 1900. Many representatives of the Russian Orthodox Church were opposed to Tolstoy’s novella. Alexander Gusev, a Professor of the Kazan Theological
Academy, attacked it as a dangerous work advocating birth control through abstinence.  

Likewise, Peter Ulf Møller links Tolstoy’s views on sexuality to a changing perception of marriage in Europe. He examined Tolstoy’s novella in the context of Russian literary debates on sexuality in the 1890s and compared Russian views on modern marriage to the Scandinavian vision of sexual morality in the 1880-90s. According to Møller, Russian and Scandinavian writers were preoccupied with such themes as the notion of the animal in Man, the Christian responses to Charles Darwin’s theory of biological evolution, and the nature of modern marriage.

Møller also discusses the impact of Tolstoy’s novella on the Russian reading public. He refers to Nikolai Mikhailovsky’s March 1890 article in which he describes how Tolstoy’s unpublished manuscript was copied and distributed widely from hand to hand, contributing to an unprecedented rise in interest in Beethoven’s Violin Sonata No. 9 (the Kreutzer). According to Møller’s study, the popularity of Tolstoy’s novella in its unpublished form led also to the boost in sale of sheet music of Beethoven’s sonata and its enormous popularity among Russian musicians who performed it “at all kinds of chamber music concerts” all over Russia. As we can see from this report, as early as 1890 the Russian audience was keen to engage in debates about hysteria, degenerated disorders and modern medical discourses about the effects of music on individuals with heightened sensitivity. In the text below I would like to focus on Tolstoy’s reception of Beethoven and link it to the popularity of Beethoven in Russia in the nineteenth-century. It will be argued that Tolstoy’s re-evaluation of Beethoven in The Kreutzer Sonata is shaped not only by contemporary debates about the modern family, sexuality and degeneration but also by Tolstoy’s own concerns about the crisis of spiritual values and the formation of emotional communities in modern times.

The most representative account of the collective reading of Tolstoy’s novella comes from the memoirs of Russian Senator Anatolii Koni in which he recollects the effect of his illegal public reading of Tolstoy’s novella. He writes how he had to stop now and then because he was overwhelmed by his emotions. He goes on to say that listeners at his reading were infected by this strange work and that The Kreutzer Sonata should be recommended as “an obligatory reading for all young people at the threshold of life”. The prominent critic Nikolai Strakhov, who listened to Koni’s reading of Tolstoy’s work, did not have a chance to borrow one of the illegal copies of it but he nevertheless reported to Tolstoy about his impression of the novella. He praised Tolstoy thus: “You have not written anything stronger than this, nor anything darker”. As we can see from these examples, the illegal circulation of Tolstoy’s novella contributed to the formation of new emotional communities in Russia bringing together people who adhere to the same norms of emotional expression and value.

Sofia Tolstaya also contributed to the growing debate about the value of her husband’s story for the formation of the vision of modern family life and sexual morality in Russia. She produced several copies of her husband’s work and wrote about the story in her letters, diary and autobiography. As Michael Katz points out, Sofia Tolstaya “disagreed markedly with Tolstoy’s emphases and conclusions at almost every turn; moreover, she was deeply embarrassed that the reading public had construed the story as a reflection of her own marriage to the famous writer”. In response to her husband’s novella, Tolstaya wrote two stories that were meant to challenge her husband’s views on family life and moral sexuality: “Whose Fault?” and “Song Without Words”. In her second story “Song Without Words” (1898), she
portrays a married woman (Sasha) who overcomes her grief, caused by the death of her mother, by playing music. She also falls in love with the performer and composer who does not reciprocate her feelings. The heroine becomes deeply unhappy and confused. Subsequently, she goes mad and decides to live in a hospital for nervous diseases.

Katz links Tolstaya’s story to contemporary debates about modern life, sexuality and gender roles in Russia. He praises the story for a highly empathetic account of female psychology and goes on to say that: “Madness in Sofia Andreyevna Tolstaya’s story ‘Song without Words’ includes a brief historical survey of Russian attitudes toward the malady. When the heroine feels the onset of mental disease, she retreats to a convent to seek spiritual consolation from an elder, but to no avail. The advice she receives there does not help her sort through her own motives or solve her dilemma. The traditional treatment in medieval Russia proves to be inadequate to meet the demands of modern life”. By exploring the heroine’s compulsive fascination with music through the lens of a mad person, Tolstaya in her story had managed to expose the world of a Moscow composer and the masculine milieu of music conservatory as morally deficient. “It hints suggestively,” notes Katz, “at the clandestine unacknowledged relationships between teachers and students, calling attention to an element of homoerotic attraction”.

It can be added to this observation that Tolstaya’s discussion of the taboo subject (such as homosexuality) and of the association between music and mental problems, sheds light on the importance of literature in promoting a public debate on the role of music as a basis for national culture. Both authors express concerns about the view of music as a tool for self-improvement and for development of emotional sensitivity. Such a view was popular among nineteenth-century writers in Russia and in Europe. In her letter to John Sibree written on 11 February 1848, fo example, George Eliot, talks about her impressions of Mendelssohn’s oratorio Elijah and Bellini’s opera thus: “I agree with you as to the inherent superiority of music […] painting and sculpture are but an idealizing of our actual existence. Music arches over this existence with another and diviner”. In her letter to Sarah Hennell, written in 1880, Eliot criticizes Mozart’s affinity with the Italian ‘sugared’ mindset, and refers to Schubert and Beethoven as being intellectually superior to the Italian idiom. As was the case in Victorian Britain, Russian authors saw German composers’ works as being important for the development of the intellectual and spiritual faculties as opposed to the Italian composers and those who composed music in the Italian mode of expression. This view is reflected in Tolstoy’s novel Anna Karenina in which Stepan Obolensky, Anna’s brother, is presented as an immature person and womaniser influenced by Italian operas. According to Taruskin, the popularity of Italian opera in Russia became to wither away when Alexander III ceased to support it for nationalistic reasons. As Taruskin suggests, “The later sixties were a period of marked decline for the St Petersburg Italian opera. The repertoire was ossifying, growing stale. There were no composers on the Italian horizon to compare with Verdi or his predecessors”. The far less expensive productions of Russian opera in the 1860s became more popular and more profitable than the Italian ones. According to Taruskin, the institutional means for maintaining productivity of music in Russia, including the Russian Musical Society and the first music conservatory, were established in the 1860s due to the “heroic labours” of Anton Rubinstein (1829-1894). Taruskin defines him as “a virtuoso of international fame and a composer of German schooling” who saw “the future of Russian music in terms of
professionalization under the sponsorship of the aristocracy and the imported teachers and virtuosos”. Such a vision of the development of Russian musical life caused a significant backlash led by Stasov and Balakirev who were opposed to the German-dominated musical culture in Russia.

Russian musicians, including Petr Chaikovsky, acquired their professional status only in the 1860s, and they often forged their Russian identity by engaging with German musical culture and sought a new post-Beethovenian language of expression. Russian debates about musical culture and identity in the 1860s-1880s often associated German music with seriousness and spirituality and presented Italian music as an embodiment of sensuality. A commitment of Russian performers to German instrumental music, as Taruskin affirms, can be explained by the popular belief that it was “the highest and the most philosophical of all the arts”. In contrast to the popular belief, Tolstoy’s Kreutzer Sonata probes Russian readers and music lovers to reassess their views about the effect of music on their self-development and moral well-being. By presenting the character Pozdnyshev as a highly intelligent Russian aristocrat who becomes disturbed by incomprehensible emotion triggered by his wife’s and Truchachevsky’s performance of Beethoven’s music, Tolstoy suggests that Pozdnyshev recognises some quality in the music that reveal the mental state of the composer.

Pozdnyshev’s interpretation of his wife’s appearance after the performance of Beethoven’s music as being erotically aroused and displaced from her domestic environment, reveals his fear that music can contribute to moral corruption of members of all classes and destroy family ties. As Lisa Burrell explains succinctly, “Tolstoy responded negatively to Beethoven’s sonata form narrative because the moral struggle within its plot aroused feelings of guilt about his own sexual immorality.” She goes on to say: “Whatever Tolstoy’s interpretation of Beethoven’s narrative may have been, it is clear that Beethoven’s sonata could not have been understood to embody the educational function that Tolstoy promotes in his later works”.

*Tolstoy’s Novella as a Response to Schopenhauer*

In addition to the issues pertinent to sexual morality and the use of music in domestic spaces, Tolstoy’s The Kreutzer Sonata highlights the negative qualities of individualism and the corresponding drive to renounce the individual self. Pozdnyshev’s allusion to Arthur Schopenhauer (1788-1860) reveals his nihilistic mindset. He questions the meaning of life and evolutionary progress from the point of view of a modern thinker who has a utilitarian approach to life. Pozdnyshev says: “But why should we live? If life has no purpose, if it’s been given us for its own sake, then the Schopenhauers, as well as the Hartmanns, are perfectly right. And even if there is a purpose in life, it seems obvious that when that purpose is fulfilled life must come to an end”. The reference to Schopenhauer in this context indicates the popularity of his ideas among Russian educated elite.

Tolstoy’s familiarity with the philosophy of Arthur Schopenhauer (1788-1860), whose 1818 treatise The Word as Will and Representation was translated by Tolstoy’s friend Afanasii Fet, is well known. Harry Walsh’s article argues convincingly that Schopenhauer’s On the Freedom of the Will serves as a source for the second epilogue of War and Peace. It should be born in mind though that some of Tolstoy’s ideas developed independently from Schopenhauer despite their affinity. Emily Shaw elucidates: “Although it is clear that Tolstoy extensively read and
reflected on Schopenhauer's philosophy, evidence suggests that a natural degree of affinity existed between the two thinkers, resulting in Tolstoy's independent arrival at some conclusions similar to Schopenhauer's. It may be said that Tolstoy found in Schopenhauer an articulation of his own already formed (or germinating) intuitions and metaphysical convictions. His influence was catalytic rather than generative, as Tolstoy did not simply adopt his ideas as new and uncharted information, but more precisely found in Schopenhauer's philosophy a formulation for his own thoughts.21

Schopenhauer’s book The World as Will and Representation was published in Russia in 1881. The depiction of Pozdnyshev’s crime in The Kreutzer Sonata exemplifies vividly Schopenhauer’s vision of the one’s will as an embodiment of self-assertion and of the extension of the authority of one’s will through the denial of the same will appearing in another individual. For Schopenhauer the will, that he saw as the essence of all things, manifested itself as an impulse, exemplified by brute striving. Schopenhauer’s conception of music as a direct representation of the will is strongly felt in Pozdnyshev’s interpretation of the interior quality of Beethovenian music. Pozdnyshev states: “Take that ‘Kreutzer Sonata,’ for example, take its first movement, the presto: can one really allow it to be played in a drawing-room full of women in low-cut dresses? To be played, and then followed by a little light applause, and the eating of ice-cream, and talk about the latest society gossip? Such pieces should only be played on certain special, solemn, significant occasions when certain solemn actions have to be performed, actions that correspond to the nature of the music”.22 Pozdnyshev claims that Beethoven’s sonata produces a shattering effect on him and that it generates a special feeling and energy that might be harmful for some people. It appears that he is especially responsive to the melodic structure of the sonata that has a forward-looking effect upon him. Pozdnyshev describes it as a discovery of the new reality and a new awareness of life filled with new emotions and new possibilities. He feels liberated from his everyday life and habitualized perception of reality. The transcending effect created by his perception of Beethoven’s music appears to be contributing to Pozdnyshev’s crime.

Arguably, Tolstoy’s novella poses a question about the validity of Schopenhauer’s beliefs. According to Schopenhauer, both aesthetic and ascetic experience liberate individuals from entrapment within the individual will. He also claims that music stands above all arts, providing “the innermost kernel preceding all form, or the heart of things”.23 Tolstoy goes further than Schopenhauer and brings to the fore the role of performance in the reception of ideas and emotions embedded in music. The novella suggests that Pozdnyshev might have been affected by Beethoven’s music differently if he were to listen to it in a music hall rather than in a domestic context.

Tolstoy’s The Kreutzer Sonata illustrates well Richard Gustafson’s statement, suggesting that in his writings on art Tolstoy is always preoccupied with a musical event and that “Tolstoy’s art of infection is the art of a good performance”.24 According to Caryl Emerson, Tolstoy’s “fascination and discomfort with the ‘performative present’ left a deep mark on his literary work”.25 She interprets Tolstoy’s novella as an embodiment of Tolstoy’s anxiety of music. I would like to develop this point further and explore why Tolstoy felt anxious about the interior quality of Beethovenian music. I would argue that Tolstoy’s views on Beethoven after 1880 were largely affected both by public discussions of Beethoven and by Tolstoy’s ongoing engagement with the philosophy of Schopenhauer with whom Tolstoy felt a special affinity.

First of all, it would important to discuss briefly a few biographical details that
explain why Beethoven’s Sonata No.9 was chosen by Tolstoy for his novella. As Rosamund Bartlett points out, there were several factors that triggered the creation of Tolstoy’s novella. Partially, it was inspired by a letter sent to Tolstoy in February 1886 by an anonymous deeply distressed female admirer who was concerned with the inequality of men and women in Russia. She complained to Tolstoy about the ongoing misogynist behaviour of Russian men towards women. Bartlett also suggests that Tolstoy was moved by a novella about one train passenger who boasted about his infidelity to his wife in front of other passengers.

These events coincided with Tolstoy’s exposure to several performances of Beethoven’s Violin Sonata No.9 op.47 (known also as Beethoven’s Kreutzer Sonata) in Moscow and in Yasnaya Polyana that took place in 1887. This sonata was performed by Tolstoy’s son Sergey and the family violin teacher Yuly Lyasotta. “Tolstoy certainly knew Beethoven’s Kreutzer Sonata very well,” writes Bartlett, “and it was one of relatively few opuses to feature on the list of his favourite musical works later compiled by Sergey”. As Bartlett points out, “it is the first of the sonata’s three movements which has the greatest parallel with the novella”. She explains Pozdnyshev’s response to “to the frenzied dialogue between violin and piano in its central presto” as act of uncontrollable jealousy towards Pozdnyshev’s wife and her male violinist partner.

Bartlett also thinks that Tolstoy’s was deeply affected by the marriage of his son Ilya, the birth of his son Ivan on 31 March 1888, and the birth of his granddaughter. According to Bartlett, Tolstoy felt ashamed for his inability to control his physical desire for his wife that led to the birth of Ivan, especially because his wife Sonya was reluctant to become pregnant again. Bartlett’s biography of Tolstoy also describes the book written by an American author Dr Alice Bunker Stockham sent to Tolstoy by the author that made Tolstoy aware of recent debates on evolution in America. In her book *Tokology: A Book for Every Woman*, Stockham advocated the idea that continual pregnancies are harmful for women and that men should control their sexual urges. In November 1888 Tolstoy corresponded with Stockham and told her that the book was highly useful for mankind, not just female readers. Around the same time, in his letter to Chertkov, Tolstoy expressed his regrets for living for a long time like an animal. Tolstoy’s anxieties about his behaviour took place at a time when Tolstoy largely reassessed Schopenhauer’s conception of the evil will and his pessimism. In the 1880s he adopted a religious worldview that incorporated some ideas of Schopenhauer. As Sigrid Mauer concedes, Tolstoy’s religious outlook after 1880s comprised “those views of Schopenhauer which would fit, or which he could twist to fit”.

*Tolstoy’s Image of Beethoven*

Tolstoy’s interest in Beethoven was not unique in Russia. Beethoven was one of the most important German composers who influenced Russian musical culture. Beethoven’s music attracted a considerable attention in Russia in the second half of the nineteenth century not only from music lovers but also from critics. It would be useful therefore to juxtapose Tolstoy’s personal preferences for Beethoven’s music with a wider context of the reception of Beethoven in Russia. Such an approach would enable us to understand why Tolstoy’s novella contributed to the mass interest in Beethoven’s Violin Sonata No. 9. In his 1908 article on Beethoven and Tolstoy the British author, journalist, poet and composer Charles Frederick Kenyon (1879-1926, who often published his works under the pseudonym Gerald Cumberland) describes
his astonishment at the fact reported in Aylmer Maude’s biography of Tolstoy: Maude quotes Chaikovsky’s statement suggesting that Tolstoy had doubts about Beethoven’s genius. Kenyon questions the validity of this information and asks his readers the following question: “How is it possible for a man of extraordinary intelligence, loving music, to deny the genius of Beethoven?”. He then goes on to say: “For this there seems to be only one explanation: Tolstoy is not always intellectually honest. Beethoven’s works do not fit in with Tolstoy’s theory as to what constitutes great art; therefore, Beethoven has no genius whatever”. He finds Tolstoy’s attitudes towards Beethoven contradictory in light of the fact that Tolstoy liked Beethoven’s work and often played it.

Yet, while several accounts support the view that Tolstoy enjoyed listening to Beethoven’s music, some scholars draw on the evidence provided by Tolstoy’s family members and suggest that Tolstoy’s general reception of Beethoven’s music was complicated. “On the one hand he admired and was deeply moved by the composer’s work”, writes Janneke van de Stadt, “but, on the other, he saw it as the beginning of Western’s music steady decline”. Tolstoy’s daughter and secretary Alexandra (1884-1979) claims that her father was strongly influenced by music. “Music penetrated the deepest recesses of his soul,” affirms Tolstaya, “it stirred his whole being, it released in him embryonic thoughts and emotions of which he himself was not cognizant. Waves of delight, joy, fear of losing these seconds of almost divine uplift flooded him, suffocated him. He felt like crying and laughing at once and was filled with the strongest urge to create”. Tolstaya describes her father’s negative opinion about Beethoven that he expressed privately in his conversations with different people as well as in his treatise What is Art? Alexandra Tolstaya admits her perplexity for her father’s view that despite a few compositions of Beethoven being really artful, many of his compositions were composed in haste. She emphasizes Tolstoy’s objection to the role of critics in promoting the image of Beethoven as a true genius and praising even Beethoven’s late works which, in Tolstoy’s view, were “artificial, unaccomplished and absurd”.

In his memoirs, Tolstoy’s brother-in-law Stepan Bers recalls how Tolstoy was deeply affected by music and how he accompanied his elder sister’s singing. He also talks about Tolstoy’s fear of music as follows: “I have noticed that the sensations which music called forth in him were accompanied by a slight pallor of the face and an imperceptible grimace, which seemed to express fright”. Rolland thinks that Tolstoy reproaches Beethoven for his power. He writes: “Tolstoy is like Goethe listening to the C minor Symphony. It troubles him, and he experiences the feeling of anger against the imperious master who can thus subject him to his will”. According to Rolland, Tolstoy’s fear of the unknown power of sounds grew stronger towards the end of his life.

Although Rolland does not provide many examples to support his claim, it is worth considering several references to Beethoven’s music in Tolstoy’s work written before his novella The Kreutzer Sonata in order to identify the emergence of anxiety in Tolstoy’s reception of Beethoven. Commenting on Nikolen’ka’s responses to his mother’s performance of Beethoven’s Sonata Pathétique portrayed in Childhood, Emerson suggests that this episode “restores the sense of being loved” and illustrates how sincerity of artistic expression infects the listener with “unbroken transmission of feeling”. If we look at the passage from Childhood invoked in Emerson’s chapter on Tolstoy and music, we could see that the author also refers to his mother’s playing the second concerto of the Irish composer, pianist and teacher John Field (1782-1837) and mentions that Nikolenka’s mother was his pupil. No description of the effect of
this performance on Nikolenka is provided. The narrator just mentions Field’s concerto No.2 in A flat Major and then goes on to say that: “I dozed off, and light, luminous, limpid memories rose up in my imagination. Then she started to play Beethoven’s Pathétique Sonata, and I recollected something sad, heavy and gloomy. Maman played those two pieces often, and I remember very well the feeling they evoked in me. It was like a recollection, but a recollection of what? You seemed to be recalling that had never existed”. It appears that Field’s music made Nikolenka doze off and recollect something luminous and bright.

The narrator lumps together the two pieces of music, although his description of Beethoven’s music as heavy, sad and gloomy appears to be very different from Field’s music. In both cases, the narrator emphasises the elusive and suggestive nature of musical language that resists any verbalisation. It is clear that the narrator reflects the thoughts of the adult author rather than the child portrayed in Childhood. Bearing in mind that Tolstoy’s parents died when he was very young, Tolstoy would have read about Field’s music lessons with his mother from her memoirs. Tolstoy also refers to Field in War and Peace (in volume 2) in relation to Count Rostov’s house pianist Dimmler (who was a successful piano player and a pupil of Field in real life). The portrayal of Dimmler is related to an episode in which he was asked to play Field’s Nocturne, a favourite of Countess Rostov. Bearing in mind, that Field’s nocturne genre was invented around 1815, this episode erroneously mentions Field as an inventor of the nocturne around 1810. As Piggot points out, if Field had written any nocturnes in 1810 or earlier he would have called them romances. Given that Field’s name is not mentioned in another version of Childhood, it might be possible to suggest that Tolstoy wanted to present his mother as a pupil of Field either in order to differentiate himself from the musical tradition cultivated by his mother and her generation of music lovers or to highlight her exceptional qualities as a pianist who was taught by one of the best piano teachers in Europe.

Piggot reports that by 1830 Field became a legend whose superiority among pianists was recognised by many leading composers and musicians, including Chopin, Elsner and Wieck who saw him “as a leader of his profession”. Soon after the publication of his nocturnes and concertos in 1815, his reputation as a composer grew stronger, in addition to his fame as a brilliant pianist. Subsequently, his works became an essential part of the repertoire in Europe and in Russia. In the twentieth century Field’s piano concertos were largely forgotten and he became promoted as an inventor of the nocturne and a precursor of Chopin. There is a clear confusion between critics whether Field should be placed between Mozart and Beethoven as a representative of early Romantic practice or whether his concertos should be considered as an example of a post-Beethovean progression. More importantly, it appears odd that Tolstoy’s mother would love playing both composers because Field’s attitude towards Beethoven’s music was negative: he defined Beethoven’s piano music as “German dishcloth”.

In one of the versions of the aforementioned passage from Childhood translated by Aylmer Maude and published in England in 1927, Tolstoy describes his mother finishing playing Field’s music and then preparing herself in a serious manner to play Beethoven’s music by adjusting her dress and drawing the candles nearer the music stand. The narrator describes her facial expression and her gestures as something special: “By the care with which she did all this and the thoughtfully severe expression on her face, it seemed as if she was preparing for something very serious”. Nikolen’ka goes on to describe his impression of Beethoven’s Sonata Pathétique performed by his mother thus: “[…] the familiar sounds of the piece
Mama was playing produced on me a sweet impression and at the same time disturbed me”. As we can see from this comment Rolland’s aforementioned suggestion about Tolstoy’s ambivalent attitude to Beethoven is already manifested in the draft version of Tolstoy’s Childhood. Furthermore, by using the figure of a young child as an interpreter of Beethoven’s music Tolstoy not only uncovers the complexity of Beethoven’s sonata but also creates a sense of estrangement from it.

It is worth looking at the mixture of emotions that Nikolen’ka experiences while listening to his mother’s performance in this version of Childhood. Firstly, he claims that despite knowing the whole Sonata very well he was disturbed by it and he could not go to sleep. Nikolen’ka conveys his anxieties about the possibility of the performance of this piece that could add some new layers of interpretation to Beethoven’s sonata: “What if it suddenly went not as I have expected? The restrained, majestic, but agitated motif of the Introduction, which seems to fear to express itself, made me hold my breath. The more beautiful and more complex the musical phrase the stronger became the feeling of fear lest anything should disturb its beauty, and the stronger the feeling of delight when the phrase was harmoniously resolved”. Commenting on Allegro he says: “That part always surprised me; and the feeling of surprise was as strong as if I were hearing it for the first time”. The narrator suggests that listening to Andante made him smile and dreaming of something light, transparent and joyful. He then confesses about being disturbed by the Rondo in C: “But the Rondo in C minor aroused me. ‘What is he speaking about? Where is he asking to go? What does he want?’ And one wishes it all to finish quicker, quicker, quicker; but when he had ceased to weep and to entreat I wanted still to hear the passionate expression of his suffering”.

As can be seen from Tolstoy’s rendering of Nikolenka’s emotions triggered by his mother’s performance of the Sonata Pathétique, the aesthetic pleasure arises from the array of emotions experienced by the narrator and comprises both joyful and sad sensations. The description of these sensations is similar to Schopenhauer’s belief that music expresses “not this or that particular and definitive pleasure, not this or that affliction, pain, sorrow, horror, gaiety […] but joy, pain, sorrow, horror, gaiety […] themselves, to a certain extent in the abstract, their essential nature”. Certainly, Tolstoy’s draft of Childhood differs significantly from the published version in which the reference to Nikolen’ka’s mother musical performance is laconic and elusive.

There are various reasons for such a drastic change in Beethoven’s portrayal of Nikolen’ka’s experiences. It seems likely that Tolstoy’s account of Beethoven’s sonata in his aforementioned draft translated by Maude appeared to Tolstoy too tendentious during the final stage of his editing work. In his final version, Tolstoy presents Beethoven’s music as a manifestation of the absolute music that resists verbalisation. Schopenhauer’s understanding of music in its absolute, universal form as a manifestation of the unconsciousness fits well Tolstoy’s portrayal in the final version of Childhood Nikolen’ka’s inability to describe the music he heard. He refers to it in general terms as “something sad, heavy and gloomy”. Furthermore, he identifies the feeling that Beethoven’s music invoked in him as a recollection of something unknown and something that had never existed.

The final version of Childhood presents music as something abstract rather than a specific embodiment of suffering and pain. The striking difference between the two versions suggests that during the final stage of editing Childhood Tolstoy developed a similar view to Schopenhauer’s belief that all emotion is a “modification of the will”.

Implicitly, by expressing the will music tends to convey human emotions. Nikolen’ka’s description of his mother’s performance in the final version of
Childhood is akin to Schopenhauer’s portrayal of the absolute music that “floats past us as a paradise familiar and yet eternally remote” because it “reproduces all the emotions of our innermost being, but entirely without reality and remote from its pain”.

To emphasise the experience of something remote and familiar, Tolstoy depicts Nikolen’ka’s state of mind as being dream-like and akin to the sensations experienced in one’s sleep. However, both versions of this passage contradict Daniel Rancour-Laferrière’s observation that Tolstoy was not capable of describing the effect of music on its listeners because he understood music’s “pre-verbal modes of functioning”. It can be argued instead, as Krystina Pomorska does, to think of Tolstoy’s profound interest in intuitive and unmediated forms of communication, including music. According to Martha Nussbaum’s study of emotions, not only music has deep connections to our emotional life, any analysis of emotional properties of the music should be grounded in the specifically musical properties of the work and take account of the experiences of listeners, “including the ways in which the music is ultimately experienced as about them and their emotional life”. Viewed in this light, Nikolen’ka’s associations of his mother’s performance with something unknown and at the same time familiar, as described in both versions of Childhood, highlight his ability to think creatively and intuitively about the ideas embedded in Beethoven’s music. Given the fact that Nikolen’ka listened to Beethoven’s sonata performed by his mother on many occasions, the association between Beethoven’s music and spiritual maternity plays an important role in his emotional and spiritual development.

Another example of the association between Beethoven’s music and spiritual maternity can be found in Tolstoy’s 1859 novella Family Happiness in which music enables Masha to progress from innocent girl to devoted mother. According to Natalia Dame, in this novella “whereas Masha’s husband fails to control her sexual development, Tolstoy succeeds in narratively taming Masha’s sexuality through music and channeling her sexual desires into maternal”. Her first musical performance portrayed in the novella is related to Beethoven’s Sonata Quasi Una Fantasia (also known as Moonlight Sonata, op.27, no.2). The reader sees 17-year-old Masha playing this sonata for her father and her father’s friend Sergei Mikhailych, her future husband, who had asked her to play Beethoven’s sonata. Her performance has a powerful effect on Sergei Mikhailych and triggers her development into a desirable object. As their relationship progresses, Sergei Mikhailych and Masha are depicted as using music as a mode of communication for their desires. As Dame points out, the role of music in the novella is twofold: “The importance of Masha’s recital of Beethoven lies not only in her initial connection with Sergei Mikhailych through music, but also in Masha’s reconnection with her mother, whose untimely death plunged Masha into a state of depression and prevented her from playing piano”. By re-creating her pre-Oedipal bond with her mother through music, Masha undertakes a transition into a female performer who is regulated by a male narrative. In Dame’s opinion, Masha’s second performance of Beethoven’s Sonata Quasi Una Fantasia not only brings back memories about her first performance of this work for Sergei Mikhailych but also marks Masha’s transition from a sexually attractive society lady to “an asexual mother” who acquired a new feeling of love for her children and the father of her children. She felt that it was a beginning of a different but otherwise happy life. The notion of happiness associated with musical performances of Beethoven and Mozart as depicted in Family Happiness appears to contradict
Tolstoy’s own inconsistent treatment of Beethoven. One statement by Tolstoy about Beethoven reveals Tolstoy’s dissatisfaction with Beethoven: “I do not like him, not necessary dislike him, but he grabs you too strongly, and one does not need this: music should make one happy”.61

Yet Tolstoy’s use of musical sonatas in his novellas demonstrates his awareness of the expressive quality of the Classical sonata form of an instrumental piece comprising two, three or four successive movements of different character enabling the performer to depict feelings without words. According to J.A.P. Schulz, the sonata enables the composer “to produce a monologue through tones of melancholy, grief, sorrow, tenderness, or delight and joy”. Alternatively, maintains Schulz, it could produce “a sensitive dialogue solely through impassioned tones of similar or different qualities; or simply depict emotions [that are] violent, impetuous, and [sharply] contrasted, or light, gentle, fluent, and pleasing”.62

Beethoven’s sonatas were highly popular in the nineteenth century: they were appreciated for their richness, aesthetic excellence and originality. It was felt that they could have been interpreted in a variety of ways and their scope for interpretative strategies enabled diverse audiences to enjoy listening to them. In her study of the reception of Beethoven’s sonatas in Europe, Melissa Mann claims that by the mid-nineteenth century Beethoven’s sonatas had become an important part of the Western musical canon: “In the nineteenth century, critics and performers overwhelmingly focused on the “Pathetique,” “Moonlight,” “Tempest,” “Waldstein,” “Appassionata,” “Lebewohl,” and the five late sonatas; the remaining twenty-one received less attention in both concert halls and music literature”.63

Given the canonical reception of Beethoven’s sonatas in the nineteenth century, it would be possible to see Tolstoy’s The Kreutzer Sonata as an attempt to question the creation of national musical and literary canons through private musical performances of middle-class communities as well as by public performances. To a great extent, the Russian reception of Beethoven is similar to the reception of his works in Europe. In the 1840s Russian critics widely debated Beethoven’s late works and found them beyond comprehension but in the second half of the nineteenth century they accepted his late style compositions.

The established music critic Aleksandr Serov (1820-71) saw Beethoven as a precursor of modern music, even of Wagner’s works. He wrote: “He took the symphony to its highest level but felt that, properly speaking, all instrumental music, its whole mass, is gravitating towards a union with human speech, with song”.64 Serov’s view of the organic nature of Beethoven’s music and its powerful effect on listeners that he associated with the ideals of the French revolution shed light on Tolstoy’s fascination with Beethoven. According to Skinner, Serov was not an ideologue but he “inadvertently set the stage for more politically driven interpretations”: the prevailing view of Beethoven in late imperial Russia and in Soviet times was related to the depiction of him as revolutionary. “In the wake of the Russian Revolution,” writes Skinner, “the Communist regime in turn coopted this revisionist view, transforming Beethoven’s music into a propaganda weapon in the arsenal of one-party state and the composer himself into an icon of Soviet power”.65

Conclusion

As the present article has demonstrated, Tolstoy’s interpretation of Beethoven in The Kreutzer Sonata stems not only from Tolstoy’s long-standing engagement with Beethoven in his works, private correspondence and conversations, but also from the
debates on modern family, moral sexuality and the construction of Russian national
culture after the 1861 Great Reform. The inner conflict manifested in some parts of
Beethoven’s sonata, those displaying confrontational nature and related to gender
roles, provided Tolstoy with an opportunity to trigger a public debate on the changing
nature of modern life and family. Bearing in mind the popular association of the
sonata form among music critics with its dialogue between feminine and masculine
ideas, it can be argued that Tolstoy’s use of this form in his novella highlights the
ongoing importance of this gendered-influenced interpretation for the contemporary
discourse on male-female relationships in modern times.

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3 Gusev, A. O brake i bezbrachii. Protiv “Kreitserovoi sonaty” i poslesloviiia k nei
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5 Møller, p.100.
6 Quoted in English in Møller, p.93.
7 Quoted in English in Møller, p.93.
8 Katz, Michael, R. “‘Though this be Madness’: Sofia Tolstaya’s Second Response to
9 Katz, pp.69-70.
10 Katz, p.71.
12 Haight, The George Eliot Letters, volume 7, p.344,
13 Taruskin, Richard. Defining Russia Musically: Historical and Hermeneutical
14 Taruskin, Defining Russia Musically, p.xi.
15 Taruskin, Defining Russia Musically, p.123.
16 Taruskin, Defining Russia Musically, p.124.
17 Taruskin, Defining Russia Musically, p.215.


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Bartlett, p.325.

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