

*Interweaving Forms: Chekhov's Narrative Techniques as a Lens for  
Interpreting Tchaikovsky's Music*

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**Abstract**

Composer Dmitri Shostakovich once famously observed that many of Anton Chekhov's short stories are written in sonata form, highlighting Chekhov's use of particular musical structures in his literary works. This paper examines Chekhov's incorporation of musical approaches to plot and character development, drawing comparisons between his play *The Cherry Orchard* and Pyotr Tchaikovsky's Sixth Symphony. While comparative literature scholars such as Rosamund Bartlett and Nikolai Fortunov have attempted foundational musical analysis of Chekhov's works, there are gaps in their understanding of musical forms, and their insights have not yet been applied to the performance interpretation of the musical works themselves. This paper aims to bridge this gap by providing a deeper musical analysis that complements the existing literary scholarship regarding musicality in Chekhov's works. The first part identifies the exact elements of sonata form in Chekhov's short story "The Black Monk" while the second part offers a cross-disciplinary analytical comparison of the formal structures in Chekhov's *The Cherry Orchard* and Tchaikovsky's sixth symphony. By understanding the thematic parallels and structural similarities between literary and musical composition within their specific cultural context of late 19th-century Russia, musical performers can achieve more enlightened and inspired interpretations of Tchaikovsky's music. Conversely, a deep comprehension of musical form can enhance the appreciation of Chekhov's narrative techniques. This paper thus seeks to bridge the disciplines of literature and music, emphasizing the interwoven nature of narrative and musical form and offering fresh insights for performers and literary scholars alike.

Keywords: Music and Literature, Sonata Form, Anton Chekhov, Pyotr Tchaikovsky

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## Introduction

Anton Chekhov (1860–1904) stands as one of the most influential writers in 19th-century Russian literature. His short stories are renowned for their realism, nuanced characterization, and for pushing the boundaries of the modern short story form. Beyond the literary realm, many scholars and musicians have noted a distinct "musicality" in Chekhov's works. For instance, Soviet composer Dmitri Shostakovich noted that Chekhov's short story "The Black Monk" was in sonata form, a concept explored by literary scholars such as Rosamund Bartlett and Nikolai Fortunov. Additionally, Chekhov's play *The Cherry Orchard* has been compared to Tchaikovsky's symphonies in its abstract qualities and emotional depth.

This paper investigates the intersections between music and literature, addressing the broader question: what does it mean for a work of literature to resemble a work of music? Can these parallels be grounded in concrete formal structures, or do they remain subjective interpretations? While previous analyses have highlighted the "musicality" in Chekhov's writing, they often lack a rigorous engagement with musical theory and form.

Building on these insights, this paper offers a more precise exploration of Chekhov's use of musical structures to deepen our understanding of his work. The first section examines the sonata-like qualities of "The Black Monk," engaging with Shostakovich's observations and applying musical theory to illuminate its narrative structure. The second section draws parallels between the formal architecture of *The Cherry Orchard* and Tchaikovsky's *Symphony No. 6 in B Minor, "Pathétique"*, uncovering how shared structural and emotional elements contribute to the evocative power of both works. By bridging these artistic forms, this study seeks to enrich literary and musical interpretation, demonstrating how musical analysis can offer fresh perspectives on Chekhov's art, and how his works can, in turn, inspire new dimensions in understanding music.

## Sonata Form

A piece of music in sonata form is a musical composition typically structured in three main sections: exposition, development, and recapitulation. In the exposition, two contrasting musical themes are introduced, differing in character but linked by a specific key relationship. The exposition modulates to the dominant near the end, signifying an increase of tension and instability. After the closing theme of the exposition, the development section transforms the exposition's original two themes—they are fragmented, varied, and modulated, creating tension and complexity. The climax of the entire piece is the "pedal on the dominant," which represents the height of the sonata's tension. Finally, the recapitulation restates the original themes, now resolved within the initial key, bringing the composition to a cohesive conclusion. Smooth transitions between these sections, particularly from exposition to development and from development to recapitulation, are vital to the structural and emotional coherence of the sonata form.

While the technical intricacies of sonata form are vast, its most essential feature lies in the dynamic transformation of the two contrasting themes. This metamorphosis drives the sonata's narrative arc, unfolding like a musical story as it navigates through key changes and modulations, ultimately returning to the original key. It is this journey—rich with tension, resolution, and emotional depth—that defines the unique expressive power of the sonata form.

## “The Black Monk”

Anton Chekhov's “The Black Monk” is a story about Andrei Kovrin, a university scholar plagued by anxiety. Seeking respite, Andrei visits the countryside to stay with his friend Tanya and her father. During his stay, he encounters a mysterious apparition—the Black Monk—and begins conversing with it. The monk convinces Andrei of his “genius,” which slowly consumes his mental state. Meanwhile, Andrei falls in love with and marries Tanya, but their marriage deteriorates as his madness escalates. The story concludes with Andrei returning to his former life as a scholar, estranged from Tanya and still haunted by the Black Monk, leading to his death.

The narrative structure of “The Black Monk” aligns remarkably well with the framework of sonata form, particularly in how its sections mirror the exposition, development, and recapitulation. In sonata form, the exposition introduces two contrasting themes and transitions to the dominant key, creating tension and setting the stage for development. Similarly, the first five sections of “The Black Monk” can be interpreted as the exposition. Andrei and Tanya represent the contrasting themes: Andrei, anxious and introspective, and Tanya, grounded and hopeful. Their relationship develops against the backdrop of the countryside, but the appearance of the Black Monk can mirror an exposition’s “modulation to the dominant,” the part of a sonata’s exposition that introduces instability and tension. The narrative reaches a seeming resolution when Andrei proposes to Tanya, a moment akin to the “false ending” of a sonata’s closing theme—temporary closure within the dominant key, hinting at unresolved tensions.

In contrast to the hallucinogenic joy of the closing of Section 5, Sections 6–8 correspond to the development section, where themes introduced in the exposition are fragmented, transformed, and intensified. Here, the story darkens: Andrei’s madness deepens, Tanya becomes increasingly distraught, and their marriage unravels. This mirrors how sonatas manipulate and destabilize themes in the development section. The climax occurs when Tanya discovers Andrei conversing with the monk, symbolizing the “pedal on the dominant,” the peak of tension in a sonata’s development section before resolution. The narrative tension suggests that the marriage, like the themes in a sonata’s development, cannot return to its original harmony.

In a sonata, after the “pedal on the dominant,” the sonata often abruptly returns to the exposition. This is called the recapitulation, and the beginning material of it is often a copy and paste of the beginning material of a sonata’s exposition. Similarly, in Section 9, life seems to have returned to the way it was at the beginning of the story. Andrei is again a scholar at the university, and readers discover he is no longer married to Tanya. Just like the beginning of the story, he continues to suffer from anxiety. The letter from Tanya about her father’s death and the ruined garden echoes the exposition’s secondary theme, while the monk’s final appearance recalls its earlier manifestation. The story ends as Andrei hears the monk’s prophecy of his genius being too much for his frail body and dies—a resolution mirroring the structural and emotional closure of a sonata returning to the home key, the home key in this case being a lone Andrei.

This interpretation refines Rosamund Bartlett’s analysis, which limits the exposition to Section 1 and identifies Sections 2–7 as the development. While Bartlett argues that the monk’s introduction marks the start of the development, this interpretation misreads sonata form’s conventions. In sonata form, the development typically manipulates existing themes

rather than introducing new ones. The exposition of “The Black Monk” includes all elements characteristic of this section: introduction of themes, modulation to the dominant, and a closing theme, but Bartlett limiting it to only Section 1 does not leave room for all these elements, as Section 1 only contains the introduction of Andrei. Likewise, its development, spanning Sections 6–8, transforms these themes to reflect escalating tension and fragmentation, culminating in a recapitulation that restores—and ultimately resolves—the story's initial conflicts.

Table 1: Author’s Analysis of “The Black Monk”

<b>Exposition</b> Sections 1-5	<b>Development</b> Sections 6-8	<b>Recapitulation</b> Section 9
<b>Primary Theme:</b> Andrei	<b>Modulation and fragmentation:</b> an engaged Tanya and Andrei emotionally unstable, eventually landing in an unhappy marriage	<b>Primary theme:</b> Andrei, again single and working at the university
<b>Secondary Theme:</b> Tanya	<b>Pedal on the dominant:</b> Tanya discovers Andrei talking to the black monk, the state of their marriage collapses...	<b>Secondary theme:</b> letter from Tanya
<b>Modulation to the Dominant:</b> Introduction of the Black Monk		Reappearance of the Black Monk
<b>Closing theme:</b> Andrei proposes to Tanya		Andrei’s death

Table 2: Rosamund Bartlett’s Analysis of “The Black Monk”

<b>Exposition</b> Section 1	<b>Development</b> Sections 2-7	<b>Recapitulation</b> Sections 8-9
<b>Primary Theme:</b> Andrei	Andrei arrives to the countryside	Tanya and Andrei travel back to the countryside in an attempt to reconcile their marriage
<b>Secondary Theme:</b> Andrei travels to the countryside to see Tanya	Andrei sees the black monk	End of marriage, death of Andrei
	Unhappiness of married life	

Sonata form is not merely about the existence of two contrasting themes—it is about the journey these themes undertake and the transformation they experience through tension, development, and resolution. Similarly, “The Black Monk” is not just a story about Andrei and Tanya as isolated characters; it is a story of how their lives intersect and profoundly shape each other. Andrei, consumed by ambition and madness, and Tanya, grounded yet ultimately destabilized by their relationship, are not static entities. Their trajectories intertwine, evolve, and fracture, reflecting the emotional and structural arc of sonata form.

The beauty of sonata form lies in its ability to convey transformation—not only of musical motifs but of emotions and ideas. Chekhov’s narrative mirrors this principle, using its

structure to reflect the emotional development of its characters. The exposition establishes the initial states of Andrei and Tanya, their relationship, and the seeds of conflict. The development section intensifies and fragments these elements, pushing them to their emotional and narrative limits. Finally, the recapitulation brings the story full circle, offering resolution while highlighting how profoundly the characters—and their circumstances—have changed.

### **Chekhov and Tchaikovsky**

Since the analysis of sonata form in *The Black Monk* illustrates Chekhov's essentially musical way of thinking, it makes sense that analytical parallels can be found between his works and those of his musical contemporaries, such as Pyotr Tchaikovsky. In the literature pertaining to Tchaikovsky, the view that "mastery of form persistently eluded him" is often restated (Jackson, 1999, p. 22). However, careful analysis of Tchaikovsky's symphonies reveal that in contrast, Tchaikovsky's music exhibits "remarkable innovation, freedom, and imagination in its treatment of form" (Jackson, 1999, p. 22). Just like Chekhov pushed his readers by re-defining what is possible within the structure of the short story, Tchaikovsky pushed his listeners by doing the same thing in his symphonies. The rest of this paper will be dedicated to exploring the formal links between the works of Tchaikovsky and Chekhov, namely, in Chekhov's final play *The Cherry Orchard* and Tchaikovsky's final work, the *Pathétique Symphony*.

Premiered in 1904, *The Cherry Orchard* intertwines elements of tragedy and farce, chronicling the dispossession of an aristocratic family from their cherished estate. While Chekhov called the play a "comedy," its overarching focus on loss and decline gives it a profoundly tragic undertone (Brustein, 1964, p. xxii). The narrative begins in the nursery of Lyubov Andreyevna Ranevskaya's ancestral estate, where she returns after years abroad, accompanied by her daughter Anya. Clueless about the severity of her debts and unwilling to act on viable solutions, Lyubov allows the estate to be auctioned off to the son of a former serf. By the play's end, the family is forced to leave their home, accompanied by the haunting sound of the cherry trees being cut down.

Structurally, *The Cherry Orchard* reflects elements of sonata form. Both the exposition and recapitulation occur in the nursery of Lyubov's estate, framing the play with a sense of circularity. The exposition introduces the characters and the central conflict—Lyubov's mounting debts and the threat of losing her home—while the recapitulation mirrors this setup, showing the family leaving the estate in defeat. However, the true weight of the story lies in its development section, which constitutes the bulk of the play. Here, the plot diverges into side stories, including love triangles and comedic interludes, yet the unresolved tension of the central conflict looms over these distractions. This delayed resolution and eventual non-resolution add an abstract, fragmented quality to the play, aligning it with the structural innovations found in Tchaikovsky's works, particularly the *Pathétique Symphony*.

Premiered in 1893, Tchaikovsky's *Pathétique Symphony* is described by Walter Frisch as a "unique fusion of technique and expression" (Frisch, 2012, p. 196). The final movement, *Adagio lamentoso*, is one of the most "psychologically devastating" movements in the entire Western repertoire, because of the stepwise descents, a figure associated with the lament ever since the Baroque period. Timothy L. Jackson argues *Pathétique* steps away from a normative symphony in that it doesn't adhere to the typical form of "*per aspera ad astra* (through adversity to the stars)" (Jackson, 1999, p. 24). The third movement tricks listeners

into thinking that they have reached the triumphant end, but instead, they are met with the tragic *Adagio lamentoso* finale, which, like the first movement, features a down-ward descent.

The first movement of *Pathétique* further reflects the structural similarities between Tchaikovsky and Chekhov. Just like *The Cherry Orchard*, the first movement of *Pathétique* features a relatively short exposition, (lasting from measures 19-89) and recapitulation (measures 245-301), with the majority of the movement featuring a “scherzando-fantasy” development section lasting through measures 89-245 (Jackson, 1999, p. 30). This imbalance is comparable to *The Cherry Orchard*, where Chekhov devotes much of the play to the comedic misadventures of minor characters, delaying the inevitable tragedy. In *Pathétique*, even after such a lengthy development, there is not a proper resolution, as the first tonic chord of the recapitulation is in the first inversion instead of root position, which is the expectation according to the rules of music theory (Jackson, 1999, p. 116). Therefore, the recapitulation serves not as a resolution, but as a “passing through” to the movement’s final descent. Similarly, in *The Cherry Orchard*, the development section serves as a series of diversions from the looming tragedy, while the recapitulation merely transitions into the final sounds of the cherry trees being cut down—a symbolic representation of irreparable loss.

## **Conclusion**

This analysis highlights the inherently musical qualities in Chekhov’s works. By drawing parallels between *The Cherry Orchard* and Tchaikovsky’s *Pathétique Symphony*, it becomes evident that musicians interpreting Tchaikovsky’s compositions can gain valuable insights by engaging with Chekhov’s literature. The shared emotional depth and structural nuances between the two artists enrich an understanding of both. Similarly, literary scholars studying Chekhov can deepen their appreciation of his masterful short stories and plays by exploring the musical forms and traditions of his time.

These connections underscore a broader truth: artistic expression does not exist in isolation. Performing music is not merely about mastering notes; it is about understanding the cultural and artistic context from which the work emerges. By delving into interconnected art forms of a shared historical moment, musicians and literary scholars alike can achieve a more profound and holistic understanding of their respective disciplines.

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