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Unheard Music: Literary Refrains in the Film *A Forgotten Melody for the Flute*

Ellen Chances

> "We wanted to bring a classic closer to the present time." ("My khoteli priblizit' klassiku k sovremennosti.")
>
> —from *A Forgotten Melody for the Flute*

On the surface, Soviet director El'dar Riazanov's 1987 film, *A Forgotten Melody for the Flute* (*Zabytaia melodiia dlia fleita*),[1] a product of the *glasnost'* era, is a light comedy about illicit love. The comic capers of hero Leonid (played by Leonid Filatov), caught between the temptation to pursue his love, Lida (played by Tatiana Dogileva), and the responsibility to remain faithful to his wife, Elena (played by Irina Kupchenko), are punctuated by Riazanov's light-hearted treatment of major themes of Mikhail Gorbachev's *perestroika,* or restructuring, of Soviet society. The omnipresent corruption of bureaucracy, the senseless paper-pushing, the repressive conditions of pre-Gorbachev Soviet society, the privileges accumulated by the bureaucrats, the lies and status-seeking, the unprincipled careerists—all of these topics are splashed onto the canvas by Riazanov's playful cinematic brush.

The film stars Leonid, a bureaucrat who works in Moscow's Chief Administration of Free Time (Glavnoe Upravlenie Svobodnogo Vremeni), a governmental agency whose function, we can surmise, is as useful to society as is Monty Python's Ministry of Silly Walks. Leonid lives a comfortable life in an apartment that displays those latest material perquisites that the good, upwardly-mobile bureaucrat who toes the line can acquire.

In a country plagued by food shortages, Leonid has a healthy supply of red caviar, foreign liquor (Cinzano), crab, and ham. In a society in which only the privileged would have access to and would be able to afford foreign electronic equipment, Leonid owns a Sharp record player.

The viewer learns that the formula Leonid has used to climb up the ladder of success is this: he has married the boss's daughter. The viewer later learns that the only way to get something accomplished in the maze of bureaucratic sloth is through personal contact. It is only when the newly-promoted Leonid uses influence—through his powerful father-in-law—that the Chief Administration of Free Time receives permission to move into new quarters.

When an amateur theater group at the Chief Administration of Free Time seeks permission to put on a play, Leonid mouths the words of the new era of *glasnost',* saying to the troupe, "We have an obligation to support anything that is talented, original, and unexpected" ("Nasha obiazannost'—podderzhivat' vse talantlivoe, original'noe, neozhidannoe"). Revealing his two-faced nature, Leonid

immediately turns to his assistant and tells him, in a whisper, that the troupe should not be allowed to perform this play.

Later on in the film, that same assistant, Aleksei Ekimovich, recommends to Leonid that he sever his adulterous relationship because it will halt the momentum of his career. Aleksei, aware that Leonid will receive a big promotion if he behaves, says that he will be loyal to Leonid. "As long as you are in power," Aleksei tells him, "I am yours" ("Poka vy v sile, ia vash").

When Leonid is brought two copies of a form to fill out in order to receive permission to go abroad to a festival in Austria, he asks why he should fill out the forms, since he has been abroad before. The answer he receives is, "Not to trust is our profession" ("Ne doveriat'—nasha professiia").

One can argue strongly for an interpretation of *A Forgotten Melody for the Flute* as a fluffy comedy and as a *perestroika* theme film. It is equally important, for a more complete understanding of the film, to be aware of the explicit and implicit reverberations of Russian and Soviet literature and culture that surge through Riazanov's movie.

In a couple of sequences in the film, as Leonid is suffering a heart seizure, Riazanov cuts to what the audience gathers are images of the hero's life flashing before him. Those dream-like, illogical sequences are very different from the fundamentally realist genre of the rest of the film. They are, in fact, reminiscent of the films of the eminent Soviet and then emigre director Andrei Tarkovsky.

Riazanov uses a technique, the sound of water dripping, that is often found in Tarkovsky's movies.[2] Like Tarkovsky, Riazanov shows shots that are discomforting in their dislocation of reality —a door that opens out onto space, wind, papers flying in slow motion, long-dead people, curtains flying ghost-like in the wind. Riazanov's utilization of the familiar Tarkovsky technique and imagery is a stylistic device that seems to have no deeper implications in terms of the overall message of his film. The literary subtexts of *A Forgotten Melody for the Flute* do tie in directly to the deeper meanings embedded in the film. The most explicit literary reference is to Gogol's play *The Inspector General* (*Revizor*). It is a modern version of this play that the Central Administration of Free Time amateur actors wish to stage. Of course, it is no accident that the troupe selects Gogol's play, for that dramatic masterpiece regales its audience with a tart, satiric picture of the corruption, bribe-taking, and official lies of nineteenth-century provincial Russian society.

And it is also no surprise that Leonid is reluctant to allow the play to be performed. The employees' contemporary rendition of Gogol's *Inspector General* contains many barbs that, while nestled in the framework of the distinguished nineteenth-century author's play, might easily be construed as being squarely aimed at a modern-day corrupt bureaucracy. What upsets Leonid, for instance, is that he thinks that the actors are showing policemen—that is, government officials—riding in luxurious Chaika cars.

Riazanov places the film sequence about the Gogol play not long after his own playful barbs at Soviet contemporary bureaucratic fat cats. The very beginning of the film shows Leonid as he gets into his car. Viewers, of course, would realize

that owning a car in the Soviet Union has been a benefit only accessible to the most privileged members of that society. As Leonid is driving to work, the film audience sees the Moscow traffic and sees the attache cases of people on their way to work. Most strikingly, the audience hears the musical score, a song that highlights bureaucracy's capacity to expend energy on meaningless tasks: "We don't write, we don't sow, we don't build. We pride ourselves on the social system. We are paper, pompous people. Our work is hard . . . We have to know what the boss wants . . . and how not to mess up our career." ("My ne pishem, ne seem, ne stroem. My gordimsia obshchestvennym stroem. My bumazhnye, vazhnye liudi. Nasha sluzhba trudna . . . Nado znat′, chto zhelaet nachal′nik . . . kar′ery svoei ne isportit′.")

As these musical refrains are heard, we see fat, old, stodgy-looking officials in chauffeured cars, reading newspapers with headlines that would be guaranteed seriously to distress these complacent bureaucrats who are allergic to work: "Perestroika on the March," "The Acceleration Factor," "We are Prepared for a Bold Perestroika" ("Perestroika na marshe," "Faktor uskoreniia," "Gotovy na smeluiu perestroiku").

In his placement of these two scenes—Riazanov's satire on contemporary bureaucrats and the actors' version of Gogol's *Inspector General*—and in his own choice of subject matter for *A Forgotten Melody for the Flute,* the film director is himself, in the film as a whole, bringing the Gogol classic closer to the present time.[3]

It is the hidden reference to a work of Soviet literature that provides the most intriguing and significant subtext to the movie. And that work is Boris Pasternak's novel, *Doctor Zhivago* (*Doktor Zhivago*), which has been only recently published (1988) in the Soviet Union, in the prestigious literary journal *Novyi mir*.[4] It is important to note that Pasternak's novel was still unpublished in its author's homeland at the time when Riazanov was filming *A Forgotten Melody for the Flute.* This fact might account for the fact that the novel is not once mentioned explicitly, although it is, I believe, a significant subtext to Riazanov's film.

The parallels with *Doctor Zhivago* may be unconscious, but they are nevertheless very real. If there were not more compelling reasons to associate *A Forgotten Melody for the Flute* with *Doctor Zhivago,* one might be tempted to dismiss the similarity of names in the film and book. The film's main character is Leonid, and Leonidovich was Boris Pasternak's patronymic. The woman whom Yuri Zhivago, a married man, loves is called Lara, a four-letter name beginning with the letter "L" and ending with the letter "a." Leonid, who is married to another woman, loves Lida, whose four-letter name begins with the letter "L" and ends with the letter "a."

But far more than a vague similarity of main characters' names binds Riazanov's film to Pasternak's book. There are parallel scenes, images, and themes. The beginning of *Doctor Zhivago* features an episode in which we find singing, the hooting of train engines, and snow. The beginning of *A Forgotten Melody for the Flute* features a scene with singing, cars, and newly fallen snow. The skeletal plots of the two works share common ground. One of the major forces propelling the plots forward is the hero's conflict between the feelings he has for his wife and for his lover.

In each work, the lover is a nurse. Neither Lara nor Lida had originally chosen to become a nurse. Lara is a nurse, during the war, in the same hospital in which Zhivago is a doctor. Lida is a nurse in Leonid's place of work. In both the book and the film, there is a scene in which the lover/nurse is ironing. In both works, one scene presents the two heroines as they scrub and wash floors.

In *Doctor Zhivago* and *A Forgotten Melody for the Flute,* the image of a clock is repeated. In the novel, the strange behavior of a clock—having stopped, then starting up on its own—is interpreted by a character as having symbolic meaning. A typhus victim, in the Pasternak novel, decides that the incident with her clock portends her death. When his wife tells Zhivago that her father has broken a clock, Zhivago imparts to this incident a symbolic meaning. He believes that he will fall ill with typhus.

The movie contains a few scenes with clocks. On one occasion, we hear the clock ticking in the background. Another time, one of the office workers declares that the grandfather clock must be fixed. The clock striking the hour is heard as Leonid plays the flute for Lida. Finally, near the end of the film, when Leonid has taken on his new duties after his promotion, as the grandfather clock's hands are being guided to the correct time, a comment is made: "It's not only the clock . . . time has stopped" ("Ne tol′ko chasy . . . otstalo vremia.")

In each of the two works, a wardrobe ("garderob") figures in the action. Tonya's mother, in the Pasternak novel, sees the piece of furniture as, in some way, presaging her death. That same piece of furniture acquires a less weighty meaning in the film, as Lida, at one point, suggests that Leonid can hide behind the wardrobe. At another point, that same wardrobe again assumes a comic role, as it becomes the room divider between Lida's and Leonid's portions of the room. Riazanov finds a third role for the wardrobe, as it becomes a prop in a scene where a petty bribetaker's schemes are exposed.

In both the book and the film, the major male protagonist suffers from heart disease, and in both, he suffers a major heart seizure near the end of the work. In both works, the setting is Moscow. As he feels that he is having a heart attack, Zhivago fights his way to a streetcar's window in order to get out. Leonid looks out the window of his office and his heart having stopped, he falls to the floor.

In each work, coincidence plays a big role in the intertwinings of the fates of the major male protagonist and his lover. And in each case, the creator of the work makes certain that the audience will notice the role of coincidence. Pasternak keeps emphasizing, all the way through the novel, the way in which coincidence keeps bringing together the same people in the most unexpected circumstances.

Zhivago keeps seeing Lara, even before they become sexually and emotionally involved with one another. When Lida is the nurse that comes to Leonid's apartment to treat him after his brief spell of illness, Leonid declares, "It is fate that brought you here." He says that he first saw Lida in the play *The Inspector General,* then when he became ill, and finally, in his apartment.

In *Doctor Zhivago*, an "inward music: the irresistible power of unarmed truth, the attraction of its example" ("muzyka: neotrazimost′ bezoruzhnoi istiny, pritiagatel′nost′ ee primera")[5] is equated with the highest spiritual dimensions of human beings. The theme of the purity of the poetic "inward music," or of the unheard melody, is identified with Lara and Zhivago's love. That refrain is identified with Zhivago's poetic creation and inspiration.

In the final paragraph of the novel's epilogue, immediately before the section containing Zhivago's poems, the narrator writes, as Gordon and Dudorov are reading through Zhivago's book, "They felt a peaceful joy for this holy city and for the whole land and for the survivors among those who had played a part in this story and for their children, and the silent music of happiness filled them and enveloped them and spread far and wide." ("Schastlivoe, umilennoe spokoistvie za etot sviatoi gorod i za vsiu zemliu, za dozhivshikh do etogo vechera uchastnikov etoi istorii i ikh detei pronikalo ikh i okhvatyvalo neslyshnoiu muzykoi schast′ia, razlivsheisia daleko krugom.")[6]

"Unheard music," the "forgotten melody for the flute," represents, in Riazanov's film, the realm of Leonid's spiritual and artistic integrity. He plays the flute only for Lida, and he blames his wife's father for having discouraged the development of his creative gifts. He declares to Lida that he had gone to the conservatory and that he had been invited to join a symphony orchestra. The role that his music—his forgotten melody— plays is to serve as a reminder to him of his true self, of the self that he has denied and stifled in order to go after the material bounties of success, comfort, and career. In the name of a cushy position as a bureaucrat, Leonid has forgotten the music of his inner self.

We come, finally, to the all-important question of why Riazanov would be constantly referring to the *Zhivago* novel. Ultimately, the director is commenting, in "bringing the classic closer to the present day," on what has happened to contemporary Soviet society. The message in *Doctor Zhivago* is that Zhivago dedicates himself to true love and to the highest calling of the artist, even when following his calling leads to sacrifices in other realms of his life. Zhivago refuses, for instance, to mouth the words of politicians if he does not believe in what they say. He refuses to compromise his integrity as a doctor, even when he knows that that refusal might get him into deep trouble politically. He believes strongly in the existence of the spiritual, metaphysical dimension of life.

The case of Leonid is very different. At every step of the way, the audience follows his lies, to himself and to others, as he ensures that his career as a bureaucrat moves forward. In the process, he loses the possibility of a full-blossomed, fulfilling love affair with Lida and lets his musical talent become dull with dust. He has never allowed himself to develop his true gifts for life or for art or for spirituality.

In the complex structure of *A Forgotten Melody for the Flute*, with its layer of explicit literary reference to Gogol's social satire *The Inspector General* and implicit literary references to Pasternak's *Doctor Zhivago*, Riazanov is making a statement about the state of contemporary Soviet society.

He sets up the framework of "bringing a classic up to the present day" by satirizing the corrupt practices that infect the workaday, everyday world of Soviet bureaucratic life. He then makes us realize, through the references to *Doctor Zhivago*, that the "hero," Leonid, whom he presents to the audience, is a distorted, cheapened version of Yuri Zhivago, a "hero" of days gone by. The ugliness and corruption of the contemporary system as a whole are reflected in the ugliness and corruption of humanity that mark Leonid's behavior. People stifle their own artistic gifts. They ultimately stifle their impulses toward meaningful relationships. They remain chained to their office chairs, doing their best to block out forgotten melodies.

By the time that one comes away from seeing Riazanov's movie, one realizes that perhaps the parallels with devices from Andrei Tarkovksy's films are not confined to stylistic similarities. Perhaps, given the complex structure of subtexts that Riazanov has set up, the references to Tarkovksy's film techniques are more deliberate than we had first suspected. After all, Tarkovsky was an artist— working in the same art as does Riazanov—who never made compromises. He was true to his artistic gifts, even in the face of overwhelming opposition from narrow-minded, petty bureaucrats who tried, and often succeeded, in preventing his work from reaching Soviet film audiences. Tarkovksy, Zhivago and Pasternak were artists who believed in artistic integrity and who suffered, at the hands of bureaucrats, for their beliefs.

The multi-layered film, *A Forgotten Melody for the Flute*, leads us from the realm of light comedy to the sphere of deep meaning. In its intricate interweavings of literary and cinematic subtexts into its fabric, the movie is true to the tradition of Russian literature. For literary works within that tradition, as we know, carried on an age-long dialogue with previous literary works within that tradition. And, like its cultural brethren from the land of Russian literature and film, Riazanov's movie confronts that most important question about human existence: what values make life worth living?

NOTES

1 The film was released by Mosfilm (Mosfil′m). El′dar Riazanov and Emil′ Braginsky wrote the screenplay. Cinematography is by Vadim Alison; music, by composer Andrei Petrov; and poetry, by, among others, Evgenii Evtushenko. For American reviews of the movie, see Walter Goodman, "Sardonic Soviet Society," *New York Times*, December 21, 1988, p. C20 and Katherine Dieckmann, "Unchained Melody," *The Village Voice*, December 27, 1988, p. 81.

2 Tarkovsky speaks of the importance of the sounds of the world, rather than the sounds of a musical score, in the creation of powerful films: see *Sculpting in Time. Reflections on the Cinema*, trans. Kitty Hunter-Blair (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1987), pp. 159, 162. He singles out the sound of the noise of water in a stream as he discusses Ingmar Bergman's brilliant utilization of sound in the movie *Winter Light* (p. 162). He discusses his own incorporation of the sound of rain into his movies (p. 212).

3 The practice of using earlier literature to criticize present conditions is, of course, hardly new to Soviet cultural history. In the theater world, for example, Yuri Liubimov's Theater on the Taganka in Moscow was required, in the pre-Gorbachev years, to close the production of Pushkin's drama *Boris Godunov*. The authorities were suspicious of the

anti-regime message that Liubimov was sending to his public. (The production has since been staged, under the co-direction of Nikolai Gubenko, a later director of the Theater on the Taganka, and Liubimov, who returned to the Soviet Union from emigration for a few weeks in May, 1988, in order to rehearse his former actors for the production.)

The practice was not new to Soviet times; Aesopian language was a device to which many pre-revolutionary writers and thinkers resorted. One has only to recall the famous examples of Russian radicals who argued their political positions by discussing works of literature. Thus, Dobroliubov stated his anti-liberal sentiments in an essay about Ivan Goncharov's novel, *Oblomov.* And in the early 1860s, Fedor Dostoevsky included in *Time* (*Vremia*) and *Epoch* (*Epokha*), his political and literary magazines, anti-serfdom statements by referring, disparagingly, to the institution of slavery in the United States.

[4] Boris Pasternak, *Doktor Zhivago, Novyi mir,* No.1, 1988, pp. 10-112; No. 2, 1988, pp. 96-157; No. 3, 1988, pp. 90-174; No. 4, 1988, pp. 48-128.

[5] Boris Pasternak, *Doctor Zhivago,* trans. Max Hayward and Manya Harari (London: Collins and Harvill Press, 1958), p. 47; Boris Pasternak, *Doktor Zhivago* (Ann Arbor, Michigan: University of Michigan Press, 1959), p. 42.

[6] Pasternak, *Doctor Zhivago,* p. 464 (*Doktor Zhivago,* p. 531).