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# Existential Semiotics and Sociology of Music

Jean-Marie Jacono

Aix Marseille Univ  
LESA, UR 3274

(from *Transcending Signs, Essays in Existential Semiotics*, Eero Tarasti, ed. Berlin-Boston, Walter de Gruyter, 2023, p. 481-490)

**Abstract:** Existential semiotics deals with the social dimensions of a subject within the relation between *Moi* and *Soi*. In the *Zemic* model, social roles, institutions and practices and, on the other hand, norms, values and general codes are only taken into account. *Moi* and *Soi* form an organism, an *Ich-Ton*. Despite its interest, the theory lacks some aspects in the background. A composer is a socialized person. The role of his/her relationships, as well as social and political contexts must be analyzed to explain the meaning of a work.

Musorgsky and his works are particularly relevant to study both the existential dimensions of a composer and the relations to his artistic and social environment within a moving society. In 1874, Musorgsky's depression leads him to compose *Pictures at an exhibition*, then to refuse to perform it. The sociological and cultural contexts not only explain Musorgsky's refusal but also light the meaning of the work beyond Hartmann's exhibition. The relationship of *Pictures at an Exhibition* to Russian society provides the essential key to analyze his work.

Sociology of music challenges the semiotic concept of environment (*Umwelt*) and even existential semiotics. Nevertheless, by other means, it also links a work to the *Umwelt* and even to transcendence. The revelation of transcendence not only depends on analyses and performances. It is the result of artistic and historical processes. In this perspective, sociology of a musical work will always be helpful to existential semiotics, in spite of their differences.

**Keywords:** Sociology of music, Existential semiotics, Musorgsky's depression (1874), *Pictures at an Exhibition*, Subject, Social contexts

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Sociology of music and existential semiotics seem to belong to two different fields. Existential semiotics deals with the expression of transcendence within a musical work. The conditions of production, interpretation, and listening to music by an audience are mainly studied by sociology of music. The link seems impossible between the two disciplines. Nevertheless, sociology of music also deals with the musical work. Every structural dimension of a musical work and every one of its producers (composer, performers, and users) is concerned by a sociological approach. The

musical text leads to its contexts which may even be considered as texts according to the semiotician Raymond Monelle (2000: 152–155). From a sociological perspective, it is impossible to closely separate them: “there is no talk possibilities about music that does not imbricate at a very fundamental level some or other aspect of social relations or institutions” (Klumpenhouwer 1998: 295). **(p. 482)**

Some social dimensions are present in existential semiotics. According to Eero Tarasti, the individual (*Moi*) and the social (*Soi*) of a composer cannot be separated. *Moi* (the artist’s proper, existential ego) and *Soi* (his/her social communal self) form the same organism, an *Ich-Ton* (2012: 18–21). *Moi* and *Soi* are articulated by a central concept coming from Greimas’s semiotics, the modalities of a subject. For instance, with the modality of ‘must’, *Soi* is defined by “the normative forms and structures of communication which take the shape of musical styles” (Tarasti 2012: 23). In short, *Soi* expresses the dimensions of social and technical rules. Later, the “zemic” model presents, through a simple figure (Z), the relationships between *Moi* and *Soi*. At the bottom of the “zemic” model, *Soi*, on one hand, represents the social roles, institutions, and practices and, on the other hand, norms, values, and general codes (Tarasti 2015: 26–27). In a sense, these dimensions pave the ways to the sociological analyses: the existence of a musical work depends on the presence of social values and artistic rules. The study of their role is absolutely fundamental.

Nevertheless, some aspects which both depend on *Moi* and *Soi* are almost put on the background in this way: the relationship between a composer and the ‘actors’ of a musical work. These ‘actors’ challenge existential semiotics. Despite some theoretical comments about ‘subject and environment’ (Tarasti 2015: 128–130), existential semiotics focuses on the subject and the organic dimension of work within the expression of *Ich-Ton*. Then, we would like to explore the presence of the ‘actors’ within and outside a musical work to set up new links between existential semiotics and sociology. The Russian composer Modest Musorgsky (1839–1881) and his works are particularly relevant to study both the existential dimensions of a composer and the relations to his artistic and social environment within a moving society. Among his works, we will examine *Pictures at an Exhibition*. This famous musical work questions existential semiotics in numerous ways as an expression of the crisis of a subject. Also, it cannot be analyzed without examining its relations to the political dimensions and the ‘actors’ of Musorgsky’s environment. In this way, would it be possible to try to conceive a new definition of transcendence? This central concept of existential semiotics is absolutely essential. Nevertheless, it may be revisited according to some sociological and artistic points of view.

## 1 Around a composer

In existential semiotics, *Moi* is defined by two dimensions: the being-in-myself (*an-mir-sein* in German) which expresses the primary kinetic energy and the modality of “will” (*vouloir*), and the being-for-myself (*für-mich-sein*) with the modality of “can” (*pouvoir*). **(p. 483)** This being-for-myself is only defined by its relation to transcendence: it “corresponds to Kierkegaard’s position of the “observer”. Sartre’s negation, in which mere being shifts to transcendence, points up what is lacking in its existence; in this way, being becomes aware of itself and of transcendence. (. . .) The ego discovers its identity; it reaches a certain stability and permanent corporeality via

habit; (...)” (Tarasti 2012: 26). The individual dimension is pointed out in this concept. However, a composer is a social human being. His/her relations to others may already be conceived in this part of *Moi*. The theory does not clearly take them into account. They seem to belong to the sphere of *Soi* which is divided into two parts: being-for-itself (“know”, *savoir*) and being-in-itself (“must”, *devoir*). In fact, the sphere of *Soi* is linked to the subject: “Being-for-itself means the aforementioned norms, ideas and values as realized by the conduct of the subject in his or her *Dasein*” (Tarasti 2012: 26). Even if the relationships between the spheres of *Moi* and *Soi* may pave the way to the study of a subject in his/her human environment (Tarasti 2015: 128–130), they are not evoked. Yet they are fundamental even in the perspective of existential semiotics.

The composer discovers his/her identity through social and cultural relationships. According to the sociologist of literature Lucien Goldmann, every writer or artist is a transindividual subject belonging to several collective groups and structures (1966: 152). This concept is similar to Norbert Elias’s configuration: every person depends on the presence of others. This interdependence is not only a sociological reality, but a fundamental way in the making of an individuality. The society is not only a factor which standardizes: it is a “factor of individualization” thanks to this interdependence (Elias 1997: 103). The social and artistic relations make up the identity of a creator. In his interpretation of Mozart, Elias links the possibilities of composition to the social groups and social classes of his time (1991: 26). Mozart’s ambivalent behaviour came from the conflict between his will to be both a free composer and to seduce Vienna’s aristocracy. Do these aspects only belong to *Soi* (Tarasti, 2012: 36)? As they play a major role in the constitution of an artist’s identity, they could also find a place in the sphere of *Moi* (being-for-myself) with the modality of “can”. The ideas of a composer are determined by his/her relationships to artistic and social groups within a society. They contribute to the appearance of existential dimensions. The composer’s will to assert autonomy and an original place in artistic production comes also from these social relations.

In short, it is necessary to take into account the situation of a composer as an interdependent person. The socialized dimensions of *Moi* have to be included in the field of the existential semiotics. They allow analyzing Musorgsky’s crisis in 1874, visible both in his works and his social life. We have to recall briefly its process. **(p. 484)**

## 2 Despair and salvation

Since the 1860s, Musorgsky was a member of a group of five young composers called “The Mighty Handful” by their mentor, Vladimir Stasov. Their musical gatherings in Saint Petersburg were fruitful. They allowed these amateurs to become experienced in composition thanks to the study of other composers and discussions on their musical works. They could challenge the academic direction of Conservatory by the creation of a Free Music School, and define new ways for Russian music. Musorgsky’s personality and ideas emerged thanks to his contacts with Balakirev, Borodin, Cui, Rimsky-Korsakov, and Stasov. Their will to create a new speech and new forms in music, under the influence of Realism, helped Musorgsky to compose outstanding vocal works in the 1860s. His identity as a composer, his *Moi*, was both the result from individual and collective ideas. Furthermore, this circle was not only a musical group, but also a real

family for Musorgsky. As an unmarried and an almost lonely man after the death of his mother (1865), he could find a warm atmosphere and even friends within this musical circle.

However, the common ideal of the “Mighty Handful” disappeared gradually at the beginning of the 1870s within a changing society. Each member found his proper way: Rimsky-Korsakov, for instance, became a professor at Saint Petersburg Conservatory and adopted western musical techniques as a professional composer. “The circle’s past is bright; its present is cloudy; gloomy days have begun”, wrote Musorgsky to Glinka’s sister on 11 July 1872 (Orlova 1983: 272). The “Mighty Handful” totally broke up in spite of the first performances of Musorgsky’s *Boris Godunov* at Maryinsky Theater in February 1874, after a long demand from the Five to perform it (the opera was first rejected by the Imperial Theaters directorate in 1871). The success of *Boris Godunov* could not give new dynamics to the circle. Only Stasov enjoyed it. Cui wrote a very hostile review in *St Petersburg Gazette* which hurt Musorgsky (Brown 2006: 133–137). Furthermore, success did not resolve Musorgsky’s situation. He continued to work as a clerk in the Forestry Section of the Ministry of State Property and remained an unprofessional composer.

The dissolution of the “Mighty Handful” led Musorgsky to depression. Stasov was the only one to keep in touch with him. On March 6, he wrote to his daughter “He has completely changed. He has begun to drink more and more, his face has swollen and turned dark red, his eyes have gone bad (. . .)” (Russ 1992: 14). Nevertheless, thanks to an aristocratic friend, the poet Golenischev-Kutuzov, Musorgsky could find support and new perspectives in composition. Golenischev-Kutuzov provided the verses of a melody after a painting by Vereschagin, *The Forgotten*, and two song cycles, *Sunless* (1874) and *Songs and Dances of Death* (1875–1877). These titles are very significant. They link to Musorgsky’s crisis, even if their meaning is more complex. **(p. 485)** These short works are no more connected to the preparation of operas (Jacono 2018: 132). Do they reveal an existential dimension in music and Musorgsky’s *Dasein*, beyond this clear conjuring up of his despair? The six songs of *Sunless* need to be analyzed deeply. The use of short lyrical melodies and unconventional chords in the harmony expresses intensively what was already emerging in *Boris Godunov*: the assertion of the subject, *Moi*, both far from a realist and a conventional musical language. We could find existential signs within each song of this cycle. However, *Sunless* is an intertextual work. It is closely linked to *Pictures at an Exhibition* composed at the same time for piano. The different pieces of this well-known work seem only to evoke the paintings by a composer’s friend, Victor Hartmann. In fact, they allow Musorgsky to give a personal reply to the break-up of the “Mighty Handful” and to define other perspectives to *Moi*.

### 3 Existential and sociological meanings

*Pictures at an Exhibition* is structured by a narrative course from the beginning, ‘Promenade’, to the last piece, ‘The Bogatyr’s gate’. ‘Promenade’ (*Allegro giusto nel modo russo*) depicts Musorgsky himself and not an anonymous visitor of Hartmann’s exhibition (Russ 1992: 35). Its folk-inspired theme expresses Russian features which were also emphasized by the “Mighty Handful” in the 1860s (the use of modal and variable musical scales, for instance). This expression of Musorgsky’s identity as *Moi* is

socialized. It is included in the cultural and social contexts of his time. This *Moi* faces up to different situations through the presence of Hartmann's pictures. Among others, the most striking expression of existential signs may be found in the eighth piece, 'Catacombae, (sepulcrum romanum)', immediately followed by 'Con mortuis in lingua mortua'. There is no more melody in 'Catacombae' but violent and stark chords contrasted in register, dynamic and spacing, without clear harmony till the beginning of 'Con mortuis' (Figure 1). It is a total negation of the basic elements of the work.

The beginning of *Pictures* sets out one of the two principles used by Musorgsky, according to Caryl Emerson (1999: 68–69): the process, a celebration of possible movement in multiple directions that is independent of beginnings and ends. Then, in 'Catacombae', we may observe the second principle: non-predetermination or surprise. These organic principles seem loosely connected to the influence of Darwin on Musorgsky.

Beyond the representation of a picture made by Hartmann after a visit to Paris catacombs, this striking piece deals with the expression of death. (p. 486)



**Figure 1:** M. Musorgsky. *Pictures at an Exhibition*. 'Catacombae', m. 1–7. St. Petersburg: Bessel, 1874.

It stops the musical flow coming from the previous one, 'Limoges, le marché', and reveals the transcendence through the negation of life. This brutal presence of death gives also Musorgsky the opportunity to evoke his own situation after the end of the "Mighty Handful". The violent break-up of 'Catacombae' involves his longing for new horizons. The Promenade theme appears for the first time in the following piece, 'Con mortuis', and later within 'The Bogatyr's gate'. Then, it is surrounded by Russian themes and sounds: a processional theme evoking tsar's greatness, an Orthodox hymn, and bell sounds recalling tsar Boris Godunov's coronation. Their presence is not a coincidence. Hartmann designed a gate in a Russian style for a competition about the building of a grand entrance to the city of Kiev. This monument had to be a tribute to tsar Alexandre II, who escaped from assassination in 1866. At the end of the narrative course of *Pictures*, the Promenade theme is "going home" (Tarasti 1996: 298). In fact, Musorgsky joins within music the traditional Russia whose greatness is emphasized in the last piece. What does this nationalist celebration of conservative Russian powers at the end of *Pictures* mean? Certainly, it is possible to do a semiotic analysis of *Pictures at an Exhibition* with the use of modalities (Tarasti 1996: 293–335). It is also possible to view the moving from *Moi* ('Catacombae') to *Soi* via the integration of the Promenade theme in another atmosphere. However, it is impossible not to deal with the

sociological and political meanings linked to this work. They allow explaining its existential dimensions.

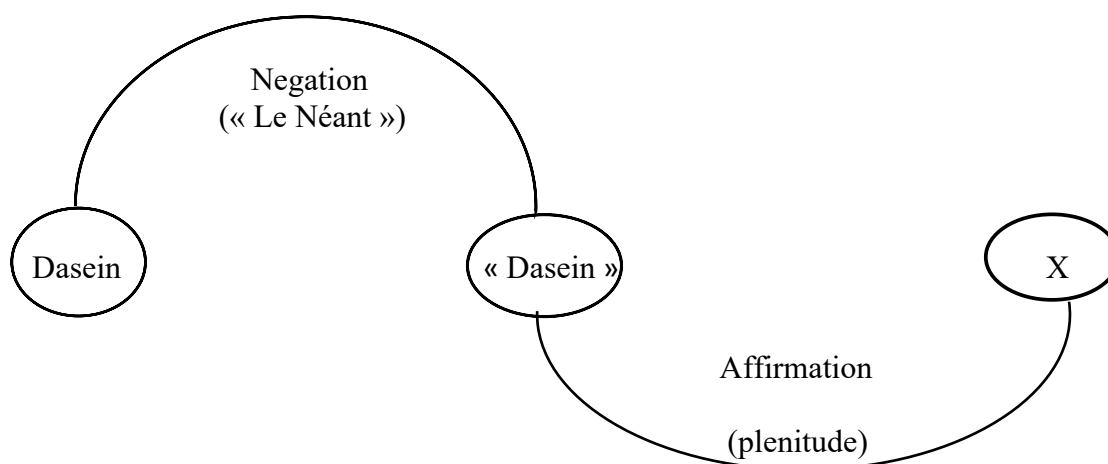
We have to take into account the relation to the audience. In the semiotics of literature, Umberto Eco explained a text is written for a reader. The writing of a novel cannot be conceived without his/her cooperation; the text even produces a reader (1985: 61–69). In music, it is necessary to adopt similar views summarized by Tarasti: “the composer keeps in mind an idealized image of future listeners and their location. In modern terms, the composer thinks of a collective, “implied listener”. The social is inside both of these musical subjects, composer and listener. The social is their common *Soi*.” (2012: 110). However, this fundamental relationship has to be clarified in its contexts in terms of the sociology of music. Who were the listeners of *Pictures at an Exhibition*? (p. 487)

A fact is hardly mentioned in the studies of *Pictures*: the absence of publication. Musorgsky composed quickly this work in June 1874. On July 26, he wrote in Russian on the cover of the score *K petchaty* (to be printed). However, this manuscript was never edited by the Bessel Publishers house. It is not a lack of care. Musorgsky accepted the publication of *Sunless* at the end of 1874 but put *Pictures* aside. Furthermore, he never performed it during his lifetime. neither at a musical gathering in Saint Petersburg for his/her friends nor in the concert tour organized in association with the soprano Daria Leonova in Ukraine (1879). Musorgsky refused the presence of an audience. *Pictures at an Exhibition* was only published in 1886, after his death. How to explain his behaviour? *Pictures* were both the original production and a way to resolve his existential crisis, also expressed in the works he composed at the same time. It was a big protest against the disappearance of the “Mighty Handful” and the loss of their ideal. After ‘Catacombae’, the work involves Musorgsky’s longing to be reborn and to reach a new community within music. The best solution for him was to assert a community bigger than the “Five” at the end of *Pictures at an Exhibition*’s course, the Russian nation. ‘The Bogatyr’s gate’ celebrates its harmony: the traditional forces (tsar, Orthodox church, and even Russian people within the melody of Promenade theme) are not in conflict. This ideal view is a kind of fairy tale. It is not a coincidence if it appears just after the evocation of a tale character in the ninth piece, the witch Baba Yaga. This mythical Russia is a “picture”. It is far from Musorgsky’s real opinions and has to be linked to the works where he deals with solitude (*Sunless*, for instance). In short, *Pictures at an Exhibition* is a musical provocation against Musorgsky’s previous friends.

However, the publication of the work as soon as its performances would have immediately been covered by a political meaning, even by the implied listeners of the “Mighty Handful”. Musorgsky was emphasizing the role of Russian people in the last scene of *Boris Godunov* under the influence of the populist historian Kostomarov (Taruskin 1993: 271). This revolution scene got an enthusiastic reaction of young students at the première of the opera. Musorgsky was regarded as a progressive composer linked to the preoccupations of the intelligentsia and even to the struggle of populist revolutionaries. Six months later, *Pictures at an Exhibition* would have generated confusion. The celebration of traditional Russia at the end of *Pictures* was only able to be interpreted as a celebration of tsar by whatever audience. It would have destroyed Musorgsky’s reputation. The withdrawal of the work was probably a pity for

Musorgsky: *Pictures at an Exhibition* was – and stays – his only substantial instrumental composition, with the exception of the orchestral tone poem *St John's Night on the Bare Mountain*. Nevertheless, in the contexts of Russian society, the refusal of performers and listeners was the only solution to avoid hostile reactions and controversies about his so-called betrayal of progressive intelligentsia's hopes. (p. 488)

According to existential semiotics, this behaviour could be analyzed as the will to assert *Moi* (being-for-myself) against *Soi* (being-for-it-self). The generative course of the subject through *Pictures* could also be analyzed after the basic model of *Dasein*, from negation (the evocation of death in 'Catacombae') to affirmation ('The Bogatyr's gate') (cf. Figure 2).



**Figure 2:** Existential semiotic model of *Dasein* and two “transcendental” acts: negation and affirmation (Tarasti 2012: 73).

However, the sociological and cultural contexts not only explain Musorgsky's refusal but also light the meaning of the work beyond Hartmann's exhibition. The relationship of *Pictures at an Exhibition* to Russian society provides an essential key to analyze the work. Does Musorgsky's behaviour concern transcendence? The question is fundamental in the field of existential semiotics to determine the relations between *Dasein* and transcendence. It cannot also be ignored by socio- logical perspectives.

## 4 Organicity and conflicts

If each subject is determined by his/her environment or *Umwelt*, then, what is precisely the *Umwelt* and what is its role? This concept comes from the theories of the Estonian biologist Jakob von Uexküll. According to him, “each organism lives in his own universe of signs, which he calls the *Umwelt*” (Tarasti 2015: 120). This organism is of course an *Ich-Ton* which distinguishes *Moi* (individual) and *Soi* (social). The *Umwelt* allows defining what surrounds a subject and may explain his/her evolution to the expression of transcendence. It is a large field which unites different disciplines. Culture and history have not a special position in the *Umwelt*. They are only a part of the environment. The *Umwelt* and *Ich-Ton* concept lead to the predominance of



organicity in the process of life as soon as in artistic production. **(p. 489)** The role of a subject in existential semiotics is also emphasized to reject the concepts coming from a Stalinist and dogmatic Marxism, where the individual disappears.

By other means, by other concepts, sociology of music also links work to the *Umwelt* and even to transcendence. This *Umwelt* is determined by social realities and social processes which strongly or weakly condition the musical life and the musical works. Even if a musical work is autonomous and depends on artistic rules, it is connected to these social and cultural backgrounds at different levels. A society is always the place of conflicts. The processes of composition, performance, listening, and reception of a musical work are also linked to artistic and social conflicts. In the perspective of sociology, the distinction between *Moi* and *Soi* is almost impossible. As an interdependent person, a subject is connected to others. *Moi* is always a socialized *Moi*. This inclusion in a social reality explains why some composers are inventive and why others only produce conventional works for an audience. Nevertheless, sociology of music and existential semiotics have the same goal: to explain the value of a work. Certainly, this value depends on the original production of a composer. It also depends on the possibility for different audiences, in other societies and contexts, to question the same work and to give it meanings. This perspective also includes the performers. It explains why *Pictures at an Exhibition* was only successful in the 1920s thanks to the orchestrations by Ravel and Funtek.

Transcendence comes from a subject's experience. It may express within music something hidden in a subject's consciousness, something great which cannot be reduced to a clear content according to Ernst Bloch's views in *The Principle of Hope*. Transcendence also comes from the will to escape from cultural and social realities by the creation of an imaginary world in a work. This world becomes transcendental if it exceeds the expectations of implied listeners. Is it an eternal value? The revelation of transcendence not only depends on analyses and performances. It is the result of artistic and historical processes. In this perspective, sociology of musical work will always be helpful to existential semiotics, in spite of their differences.

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