

A DAY IN THE LIFE OF FYODOR DOSTOEVSKY: THE BROTHERS KARAMAZOV SUITE

The creative process can be a daunting task for even the most genius of individuals. *A Day in the Life of Fyodor Dostoevsky* is written to reflect just that – the mindset of the great Russian author, Fyodor Dostoevsky on any given day when writing his masterpiece *The Brothers Karamazov*.¹ This musical investigation into the mindset of Dostoevsky is presented by means of musical representations of his characters. These are not written to parallel the plot, but instead to capture the very nature of each of these characters. It can be argued that music composers are burdened with challenging ideas very much like authors (e.g. “The Tortured Artist Syndrome). However, it is Dostoevsky’s incredible ability to balance these very abstract ideas with accessible language that gives rise to *The Brothers Karamazov* as a timeless piece of literature. It is the aim of this composition to do the same through music.

Given the tumultuous relationships of characters in his novel, a day in the life of Fyodor Dostoevsky would have been plagued at every turn with the violent passion of Dmitry, the intellectual diatribes of Ivan, the envious scheming of their illegitimate brother, Smerdyakov, the fickle but sophisticated manipulations of their love interests Grushenka and Katerina, the wisdom and death of the Abbott Zosima, the innocence of random schoolboys, the self-indulgence and sharing of all of these sins by the sons’ father, Fyodor, or a spiritual crisis resolved by the hero of the story, the brother Alyosha.

A note should be made about the instrumentation choice of an extended percussion ensemble. When considering the aggressive nature of Dostoevsky’s work, it seemed appropriate to use a majority of percussion instruments. However, an extension soon presented itself in that the depth of his characters often called for more elaborate instrumentation. An extended percussion ensemble consists of any traditional percussion ensemble instrumentation, but also other instruments – however, not too distantly related so as to be considered “non-percussive”. In this case, the traditional percussion ensemble is augmented by somewhat unconventional orchestration for steel drums, synthesizer, drumset, piano, and bass guitar. In addition,

1. Excerpts in the score are italicized and from the Andrew R. MacAndrew translation of *The Brothers Karamazov*. (Bantam Books, New York, NY: 1981)

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improvisational solos are included at times to maintain the urgency of Dostoevsky's writing style.

Finally, when considering the time in which we live, it is important to consider the message of *The Brothers Karamazov*. Heroicism through simplicity is possible and to live one's life with honor and morality is a realistic vision. The lives of Dostoevsky's creation, while they are fictitious, can attest to that truth – if not, the mind of Dostoevsky himself.

1) *Fyodor (Karamazov Overture)* – The father of the Karamazov family, Fyodor stands in this book as a tired, spent man whose vices have caught up with him at every turn of his life. He has two sons by one woman (Dmitry and Ivan), a son by a second woman (Alyosha), and an illegitimate half-son of one of the house servants (Smerdyakov). These are the four brothers Karamazov and throughout the novel, Fyodor showcases the negative qualities of each of these sons through him. So, while Fyodor is the figurehead of the family, he brings shame to it in that he is a man enslaved to his own moral bankruptcy. Ironically, he shares the same name with the story's author, Fyodor Dostoevsky.

It is, of course, easy to imagine what sort of a father such a man would be, how he would bring up his children.

2) *Dmitry* – Dmitry Karamazov is the oldest of the brothers and very much subject to his passions. He eventually finds himself accused of murder, and it is a direct result of his unfettered passion and rage that he has no grounds for defense in the public eye. He is a jealous man who follows the whims of his heart whenever possible, and as a result, makes a number of poor decisions with disastrous consequences. He can be best compared to the oldest son "Sonny" from the Godfather I.

"Why should such a man live?" Dmitry growled, almost frantic with rage, his shoulders so bent that he looked like a hunchback. "You tell me", he said slowly and deliberately, looking at everyone in the room in turn, and pointing at his father. "Should he be allowed to go on defiling the earth with his existence?"

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3) *Ballet of Indecision (The Meeting of Katerina and Grushenka)* – Katerina and Grushenka are the two main female characters and love interests of almost every brother at some point in the novel. Thoroughly manipulative and relishing in her feminine prowess, Grushenka is a beautiful debutant who makes a hobby out of collecting men's affections. Katerina is quite the opposite in that she honestly wants nothing but the best for the men in her life, though she is plagued with awkward youth and insecurity. That they should meet face to face in the story provides for quite the drama.

"It was just to have a good laugh that I made poor Mr. Dmitry Karamazov so crazy about me."

"Yes, but now you're going to save him. You'll talk reason to him and explain to him that you love another man, that you've loved that other man for a long time, and that now he has asked you to marry him..."

"No, no, I never promised you anything of the sort. It was you who said all those things, but I never promised."

"Well, then I must indeed have misunderstood you, " Katerina said very quietly, turning slightly paler. "You did promise, though..."

"No, my angel, Miss Katerina, I promised you nothing at all," Grushenka interrupted, looking at her with the same cheerful, innocent expression.

4) *Ivan and the Grand Inquisitor* – Ivan is probably the most intelligent of the brothers, but his pride overpowers his keen intellect – to the point that it alienates him from those around him. He spends the first half of the story arguing deep philosophical points with anyone who will listen, but ends up very sick/insane, at points wielding an axe, arguing at length about obscurities, thinking that he is engaging in long conversations with the devil and finally dying.

Before dying, though, Ivan confesses to his brother, Alyosha, a short story he had thought of writing. It is set during the grand inquisition and poses the question of what Christian zealots would have done had they found Jesus but not recognized that it was him on account of their aggressive behavior. The short story within this novel has become a staple for armchair theologians and recognized as some of Dostoevsky's best writing.

Ivan sat there with his hands pressed over his ears, his eyes downcast. He was trembling all over. The visitor went on.

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5) *Schoolboys* – Over the course of this story, the hero of *The Brothers Karamazov* develops a beautiful relationship with some schoolboys in the town. At first he chastises them for throwing rocks at another boy, but they quickly recognize that every action coming from Alyosha is rooted in love and innocence.

His charming, smiling face radiated a quiet, gentle joy.

6) *Smerdyakov* – Described by Dostoevsky as “the bastard son” of Fyodor Karamazov, Smerdyakov proves to be the most cunning and manipulative character in the story. By feigning epileptic seizures at choice times and acting “like a cripple”, Smerdyakov learns to scheme his way through life by capitalizing on the pity and guilt of those around him. It is only late in the story that it is learned that he is, in fact, healthy and capable of framing his half-brother, Dmitry for his father’s murder. His rage proves to be the end of him, too.

*“It was you who killed him!” he shouted suddenly.
Smerdyakov smiled scornfully.*

7) *The Elder Zosima and the Smell of Decay* – Meant to capture the penultimate moment of *The Brothers Karamazov*, the death of the head monk from the town’s monastery presents the hero, Alyosha, with a very unique dilemma. In a bizarre twist, the Elder Zosima, who throughout the book is revered as a very holy man respected by every one in the story, dies from old age. However, his corpse somehow smells worse than the average corpse of a monk from that monastery and soon the entire town turns on the memory of Zosima on account of the superstitious belief that he must have been, in fact, full of demonic elements.

Because of his father’s shortcomings, Alyosha found mentorship in the Elder Zosima and, in fact, is in the middle of considering a life of monasticism when this happens. But unlike the rest of the monastery and people from the town, Alyosha stays true to his reverence for the Elder’s teaching and must choose between the will of his peers and what they think is holy, and the will of his teacher and what he considered holy. Only a few monks and friends are able to serve as help for Alyosha at this critical time in his life.

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As he walked away, feeling a great tenderness for the boy, he thought: “Your warm tears will bring you peace and will gladden the soul of your dear departed. In fact, he had left Alyosha so abruptly because he had felt that he would be unable to control his own tears much long if he stayed with him.

8) *Alyosha: Epilogue* – Over the course of this tragic time in Alyosha’s life, he comes face to face with some of the most sensitive areas of his own life. Recognizing that his brothers have been wrestling with their respective sins (Dmitry-Rage, Ivan-Arrogance, Smerdyakov-Malice) Alyosha realizes that he, too, is guilty of a particular sin – apathy. Throughout the story Alyosha remains a stalwart, honest individual. It is not until the second half, though, that he recognizes that holiness demands action, though not through zealotry, but instead through love and compassion. It is not enough to just “not be bad”. It is right to “be good” instead.

Alyosha leaves the monastery and begins his new life, starting with his schoolboy friendships, helping them with their problems. *The Brothers Karamazov* ends with Alyosha sharing this newfound truth with the boys.

“You know, boys” Alyosha said, “you needn’t be afraid of life! Life is so good when you do something that is good and just.”

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