

# Polyphonic Theory in the Perspective of Intersexuality—The Relationship Between Bakhtin’s Polyphonic Novel and Polyphonic Music

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## Abstract

The “polyphonic novel”, as defined by Mikhail Bakhtin, has a limited connection, commonality and a great difference with the “polyphonic music” in the history of Western music. The “interartistry (a concept derived from intersexuality, meaning intersexuality between two categories of art)” between the two can be examined in two ways: the intertextuality of the two theories themselves, and the profound artistic dialogue between Bakhtin and the composer Mikhail Glinka on an intellectual level that is not separated from the “intersubjectivity”. The heterogeneity between the two is mainly manifested in the dichotomous characteristics of “opposition and imitation” and “contradiction and harmony”. The “interartistry” of polyphonic novel and polyphonic music is examined from the perspective of “intersexuality”, which helps to fully understand the connection and difference between them and reduce the interdisciplinary misuse and abuse of related terms.

**Keywords:** Bakhtin, polyphonic novel, polyphonic music, intersexuality

## 1. Introduction

The concept of polyphonic novel was coined by Soviet literary critic Mikhail Bakhtin. He interpreted the poetics of Dostoevsky’s novel with the musical term “polyphony”, providing a unique vision and mode of thinking for the practice of literary criticism.

The term “polyphony” is derived from the musicological concept of “polyphonic music”, which originally referred to a multi-voice music genre corresponding to homophonic music. In his book *Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics*, Bakhtin stated that Dostoevsky was an originator of the “polyphonic novel”, and that his novels are characterized by “many separate and incompatible voices and consciousnesses, and a true polyphony arising out of different voices of sufficient value (Bakhtin, M., 1988, p. 29).” In this way, he effectively linked the concept of “polyphony” in musicological theory to the artistic features of literary composition in an interdisciplinary manner. However, Bakhtin does not seem entirely affirmed by the applicability of the term “polyphony”. He wrote in his book: “It must be noted that even the metaphor we have used—comparing Dostoevsky’s novel to polyphony—is again only an analogy of phenomena, and nothing more.....But the materials used in music and fiction are so different that they have nothing more in common than a figurative analogy, and a general metaphor. We have turned this metaphor into a term, polyphonic novel, because we could not find a more appropriate term (Bakhtin, M., 1988, p. 50).” Apparently, he positions this cross-border use of polyphonic theory as a “metaphor” and repeatedly emphasizes that it is only an analogy of the phenomenon because he has his own reservations about the borrowing of the term “polyphony”. Thus, it is evident that the commonality between polyphonic novel and polyphonic music is limited.

With the introduction of Bakhtin’s “polyphonic novel” theory, the concept of “polyphony” has been widely extended from the discipline of music to many domains, which has inevitably led to the misuse, abuse and non-creative misinterpretation of the term. As for the root cause, when the concept of “polyphonic music” is regarded by Bakhtin as a metaphor for the artistic characteristics of novel writing, it is already ambiguous and contradictory to a certain extent.

After the review of the literature, it was found that there were few papers comparing polyphonic novel and polyphonic music across disciplines, and the research results were scattered, so there were still many possibilities

for further investigation. At the same time, there are no papers in CNKI that analyze the relationship between the two from the perspective of intersexuality. Therefore, the author intends to explore this phenomenon in the context of intersexuality, and explain the limited connection, commonality, and relatively great heterogeneity between Bakhtin's polyphonic novel and polyphonic music.

## 2. Basis for Interartistry Between Polyphonic Novel and Polyphonic Music

The term "intersexuality" is often used in the field of humanities and social sciences to indicate the interconnectedness or relationality between things. From the inter-contextual theory, it can be extended to intersubjectivity, intermediality, intertextuality and many other concepts. Based on the above theory, polyphonic novel and polyphonic music, which fall into different artistic categories but have certain correlation and similarity, should be discussed in the context of interartistry.

The concept of "polyphonic music" in musicology is an important source of Bakhtin's polyphonic novel theory, and his adaptation of the term "polyphony" creates a close connection and interaction between polyphonic music and polyphonic novel in different fields. Such interartistry can be examined through two aspects: the intertextual relationship between the two theories themselves, and the ideological collision and profound dialogue between Bakhtin and the composer Glinka.

### 2.1 From Musical Terminology to Poetic Theory: The Presentation of Intertextuality

The in-depth interpretation of Bakhtin's polyphonic theory is inseparable from the mutual interpretation and confirmation of musical texts. An exploration of polyphonic novel and polyphonic music based on the theory of "intertextuality" can help to effectively connect poetic theory and musical terminology, and explore the interconnection between the two.

The term "polyphonic novel", as defined by Bakhtin, is to some extent similar to the musicological term "polyphonic music" in terms of its superficial structural features. Bakhtin wrote in his book that Dostoevsky was the originator of the polyphonic novel, and that his novel created a world of polyphony. It broke away from the stereotyped European novel model, which was essentially monologic (mono-melodic) (Bakhtin, M., 1988, p. 30). The complete unity of the world under his pen cannot be reduced to the unity of a person's emotional will, just as the polyphony in music cannot be reduced to the unity of a person's emotional will. Thus, the greatest similarity between polyphonic novel and polyphonic music in terms of their superficial structures lies in the existence of "different voices with sufficient value (Bakhtin, M., 1988, p. 29)" in both of them. In the following section, the similarities between the two in terms of superficial structure will be analyzed in detail, and the deeper connections behind these superficial structural similarities will be explored under the perspective of "carnivalization".

#### 2.1.1 "Different Voices With Sufficient Value"

In the theory of polyphonic music, a work containing more than two independent melodies, with contrasting or complementary vocal parts and without any distinction of priority, is called polyphonic music, which can correspond to some extent to the conception of "polyphony" in Bakhtin's theory of polyphonic novel. In *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, Bakhtin highly summarizes the general characteristics of Dostoevsky's novel with the phrase that "different voices of sufficient value constitute a true polyphony (Bakhtin, M., 1988, p. 29)". In Dostoevsky's novel, the "different voices with sufficient value" can be represented as the independent ideologies of different characters, while in polyphonic music, they are represented as separate parts (or melodies) with equal artistic significance.

Bakhtin's classification of novels (polyphonic novel and monologic novel) has close connotations with the classification of "polyphonic music" and "homophonic music" in musicology. He argues that the polyphonic novel is another genre of fiction that is distinct from the traditional European monologic novels. The essence of the monologic novel is that the author has the supreme right and that the protagonist cannot surpass or destroy the author's monologic thinking. The polyphonic novel, on the other hand, presents a multi-part world composed of many equal and independent consciousnesses. "The author of the novel does not dominate everything; the characters and the author of the novel are involved in the dialogue as parties of equal value (Cheng, Z.-M., 2001, p. 45)", thus forming a relatively open and pluralistic dialogue relationship. Thus, we can not only get a clear glimpse of Bakhtin's overall assessment of the artistic characteristics of the polyphonic novel, but also see that such an assessment also applies to the stylistic characteristics of polyphonic music.

Taking the two-part imitative polyphony in polyphonic music theory as an example, one of the basic compositional techniques of this type of polyphony is "inverted imitation". Inverted imitation means that two melodies are symmetrical in opposite directions, like the reflection of an object in water or the refraction at the

mirror, one of which is the reflection of the other. The music composed in this way maintains the independence and continuity of its horizontal melodic line in each part of the movement, which has the same artistic significance. In the auditory sense, people can hear not only the dramatic development of the melody in the soprano voice, but also its progression in the opposite direction. In this way, Bakhtin's term "different voices with sufficient value" is manifested in polyphonic music.

In contrast, Dostoevsky's novels show an artistic conception similar to the characteristics of polyphonic music, as each character in the book defends his or her own point of view, and the arguments of the novel's characters about the world have the same value as the novelists arguments, and no one's point of view can dominate. The reader can hear the voices of the novelist, the narrator, the protagonist, and the various characters in the book, all of which are intermingled, echoing each other, and experiencing a dialogue with the reader. It is an important artistic feature of polyphonic novel according to Bakhtin, and it is also an important reason why he borrows the term "polyphony" from musicology to define Dostoevsky's novel. Thus, it can clearly indicate the intertextuality of polyphonic novel and polyphonic music in terms of external structure.

### 2.1.2 Polyphonic Novel and Polyphonic Music in the Perspective of "Carnivalization"

In addition to the intertextuality of the external structure, it can be easily found that there is a deeper intertextuality between the polyphonic novel and the polyphonic music if we place it in the context of the medieval carnival culture. The carnival poetics is an essential part of Bakhtin's theory of polyphonic novel, and it can be argued that "carnivalization" reveals the temperament of polyphonic novel in terms of discourse. Therefore, it is crucial to have an accurate grasp of the ideological form of carnival philosophy in order to thoroughly understand Bakhtin's theory of polyphonic novel.

Bakhtin pointed out that to accurately understand the "carnivalization" of Dostoevsky's novels, it is necessary to have a knowledge of the folk carnival culture of the Middle Ages, and that "carnivalization is a transformation of the carnival style into a literary language (Bakhtin, M., 1988, p. 175)." In Western carnival culture, kings are stripped of their crowns and other symbols of power, and those who are crowned are often clowns or slaves who differ greatly from the kings in their status. Bakhtin's focus on the ritualistic nature of carnival is not so much on the celebration of carnival itself, but rather on the pervasiveness of the process in the literary work and the profound meaning behind it. The people are completely liberated from the bounded relations of class, status, wealth and age that governed them in the ordinary life, presenting a sense of a world of universal revelry. At the same time, a sense of freedom, equality and the reversal of hierarchy also emerged. The inner spirit that comes through the outer forms and categories of the carnival is a spirit of alternation and change, of death and renewal, which is at the heart of the carnival perception of the world.

The above is Bakhtin's general overview of the carnival culture in the Middle Ages. By looking at the above characteristics alone, it seems impossible to make an intrinsic connection between the carnival poetics and polyphonic music. However, Bakhtin's brief introduction to the secularized songs of the Middle Ages in his book *Rabelais and His World* clearly informs the readers that Bakhtin did not rely solely on literary works as an argument in support of carnival culture in the Middle Ages. In his book, he wrote, "Songs with very secular content are sung in church, religious songs are sung as secular, or even as vulgar street ditties.....In these songs, religious content is interwoven with secular tunes, with elements of material-carnal debasement. The theme of the birth and renewal of new things is organically combined with the theme of the death of old things on a delightful and demeaning level, with the image of comic carnival decrowning (Bakhtin, M., 1988, p. 175)." Thus, in addition to discussing the characteristics of the polyphonic novel, Bakhtin also applies his carnival theory to generalize the characteristics of medieval secular songs, which constitutes deeper intertextuality between the polyphonic novel and polyphonic music.

Taking motets, a genre of polyphonic music of the late Middle Ages, as an example, the most typical motets of the 13th century were three-part songs. The lyrics attached to the upper part are gradually evolving from Latin at the beginning to dialectalized French lyrics. The Latin lyrics of the chant part and the French lyrics of the two upper parts appear in the same polyphonic music work, creating a unique "polyphonic lyric" phenomenon in motets. With the addition of dialect lyrics, the content of motets gradually became secularized, entertaining, and playful, which was a huge departure from the solemn style of religious liturgical music. Motets were thus no longer used in worship, but were passed on in secular folk society. It is a concrete manifestation of the "reversal of hierarchy" in polyphonic music, which bears the imprint of folk carnival culture.

Thus, Bakhtin's carnival theory, developed when he outlined the characteristics of the polyphonic novel, is also well supported by polyphonic music with its carnival elements. The underlying reason is that both polyphonic novel and polyphonic music, when placed in the context of medieval carnival culture, can detect a sort of

carnival spirit in them. It is a spirit of freedom and equality, alternation and change, and a sense of a world where hierarchy is reversed and all people revel in it. In this way, it constitutes deeper intertextuality between polyphonic novel and polyphonic music.

### *2.2 Writers and Musicians: A Deep Artistic Dialogue Not Detached From “Intersubjectivity”*

In addition to the intertextuality of the textual features discussed above, the “interartistry” of polyphonic novel and polyphonic music is pervasive in Bakhtin’s deep intellectual dialogue with the composer Mikhail Glinka in his book. The collision or exchange of ideas between Bakhtin, a literary scholar, and Glinka, a musician, constitutes “intersubjectivity” in a sense.

Bakhtin’s intellectual collision with the composer Mikhail Glinka is a profound artistic dialogue that is not separated from “intersexuality”. In his book *Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics*, he quoted a line from Glinka’s *Notes*: “Everything in life is counterpoint, that is, contradictory.” Bakhtin wrote, “If Glinka’s assertion that everything in life is counterpoint is translated from the language of music theory into the language of poetics, it can be argued that, for Dostoevsky, everything in life is dialogue, that is, dialogical opposition. From the point of view of philosophical aesthetics, the relationship of counterpoint in music is just a variant of the broader relationship of dialogue in music (Bakhtin, M., 1988, p. 79).” Here he borrows the composer Glinka’s view to summarize the artistic characteristics of Dostoevsky’s novel. He compares the polyphonic phenomenon in the novel, which reveals the diversity of life and the multi-layered nature of human emotions, to the phenomenon of “one against one” in which the same piece is sung by different voices and in different keys. In his opinion, “Here Dostoevsky has very incisively transposed the law of modulation from one key to another in music to the literary layout. The middle section is organized on the basis of the artistic counterpoint.....which is one to one, singing the same piece with different voices and in different keys (Bakhtin, M., 1988, p. 79).” As a result, we can see that Bakhtin’s ideas collided and interacted with Glinka’s “counterpoint” viewpoint.

The counterpoint approach mentioned by the composer Mikhail Glinka in his *Notes* is one of the oldest compositional techniques in the history of music and the main technique of composing polyphonic music. Bakhtin applies counterpoint in polyphonic music to Dostoevsky’s novels, and even extends it to describe the whole of human life, thus reflecting his absorption and transformation of the polyphonic music theory. Such interdisciplinary use of terms comes not only from his own musical accumulation and meticulous observation and comprehension of life, but also from Bakhtin’s consideration, judgment and incorporation of the musician Glinka’s view that “everything in life is a counterpoint”—a deep artistic dialogue that is not separated from intersubjectivity.

### **3. Discrimination of the Heterogeneity Between Polyphonic Novel and Polyphonic Music**

It should be noted that despite a certain degree of commonality between Bakhtin’s definition of “polyphonic novel” and Western polyphonic music, there are still significant differences between the two in many aspects. Polyphonic novel and polyphonic music fall into different disciplines and use different textual materials, so a strict comparison between them is not needed. However, a thorough understanding of the limited connection and greater heterogeneity between the two can help to avoid interdisciplinary misuse and abuse of the terms, and provide a correct way of thinking and a broad perspective for the cross-boundary use and study of the polyphony theory.

The difference between Bakhtin’s polyphonic novel and polyphonic music is mainly reflected in the following two sets of features with binary opposition:

#### *3.1 Internal Nature: Opposition and Imitation*

“Dialogue” is the core feature of Bakhtin’s polyphonic novel theory. In Bakhtin’s view, the nature of thought is dialogical, and the relationship between human beings and their consciousness presents a “purely dialogical relationship”. The polyphonic novel is a text characterized by the description of the different voices and ideologies of various characters, and should feature such complete “dialogicality”, which means that all components of the novel should be in dialogue with each other. In his book *Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics*, Bakhtin further elaborates on the connotation of “dialogicality”—which is not merely a superficial form of dialogue, but is essentially a relational opposition or confrontation. He says in his book: “The components of Dostoevsky’s material that are extremely difficult to reconcile with each other are divided into several worlds.....which vary and are diametrically opposed to each other (Bakhtin, M., 1988, p. 42).” “If Grossman could relate the principle of Dostoevsky’s structural layout (which means the integration of materials that are extremely different and incompatible with each other) to the existence of multiple centers, multiple consciousnesses (which cannot be reduced to the same type of ideology), then he would have touched directly on

the artistic secret of Dostoevsky's novels—polyphony (Bakhtin, M., 1988, p. 43).” If the expressions “extremely difficult to reconcile,” “diametrically opposed,” “extremely incompatible,” and “multiple consciousnesses” in the above passages are linked, the true meaning of “dialogic relations” as defined by Bakhtin can be understood very clearly. The essence of the so-called “pure dialogic relationship” lies in the irreconcilable opposition or confrontation between the many ideologies of the characters.

However, the nature of the opposition behind the “dialogic” character of the polyphonic novel is quite distinct from the basic characteristics of polyphonic music. In partial Western polyphonic music, the parts are indeed independent of each other. However, in the overall view, the parts are not opposed to each other or isolated, but maintain a close connection that is specific to polyphonic music. The so-called “close connection” can be traced back to “imitation”, one of the basic compositional techniques in the theory of polyphonic music. “Imitation” means that the parts perform the musical textures of the same tones in a specific sequence (Zhou, L., 2015).” Imitation is part of the counterpoint and plays a crucial role in the formation of the aesthetics of polyphonic music. It is because of this compositional technique of “imitation” that the close connection between the parts of traditional polyphonic music is constructed. Because of this, the parts are not in opposition or absolute isolation, but the different tones are passed from one part to another, causing the musical material to move from a fragmented to a concentrated state, thus presenting a sense of aural harmony and beauty.

In contrast, in Bakhtin's book, “Dostoevsky's crucial dialogicality is not just the superficial, structurally reflected dialogue uttered by his protagonists.....All the components of the novel's structure are in dialogue with each other, which means that they are in opposition to each other like counterpoint melodies (Bakhtin, M., 1988, p. 76).” It seems that Bakhtin takes the term “counterpoint” in musicology too literally. In fact, the word “counterpoint” in “counterpoint melody” does not mean “opposition or confrontation”, but rather “coordination and correspondence”. The counterpoint (i.e., the correspondence of notes) formed by the imitation of different parts constitutes the beauty of aural harmony. Therefore, from a holistic point of view, polyphonic music does not have the characteristics of “opposition” or “confrontation”. In this way, there is a difference between polyphonic novel and polyphonic music that cannot be ignored.

### 3.2 External Color: Contradiction and Harmony

The important “dialogical” feature of Bakhtin's polyphonic theory not only constitutes the inherent “oppositional” nature of the polyphonic novel, but also adds a contradictory cover to its overall exterior. The contradictory appearance of the exterior of the polyphonic novel, with its sense of “indeterminacy”, makes it vastly different in color and form from the polyphonic music that is harmonious and satisfactorily concluded as a whole.

“In Dostoevsky's works, not only the main characters argue with each other, but also certain elements of the plot development seem to be in conflict with each other. There are often different speculations about the same thing, and the psychology of the protagonists is contradictory. Such formal features are the consequences of the essence (Bakhtin, M., 1988, p. 76).” “Its complex and contradictory structural layout.....interweaves conflicting elements in every word (Bakhtin, M., 1988, p. 41).” Thus, for Bakhtin, the polyphonic element of the polyphonic novel lies in the “separate and incompatible voices” of the work. These voices hold their own views, contradicting each other, and together they create a song of many voices, which Bakhtin calls polyphony, but it is not quite so. In the novel, many independent ideologies form different voices, which cannot be reconciled in mutual confrontation and opposition. Since these confrontations of voices have not been dissolved through dialectical development, the novel creates an indeterminate, incongruous sense of cacophony and contradiction in the overall artistic tone. It differs significantly from polyphonic music in terms of artistic color and overall aural perception.

In fact, polyphonic music does not seem to be conflicting, noisy or contradictory, because polyphonic composition is essentially an art of keeping the tunes harmonious and beautiful. Even though there is a contrast between the parts, this contrast is “based on harmony, balance and complementarity, a combination of harmony (Qian, H., 2018, pp. 196-206).” In other words, the overall color of polyphonic music is not contradictory but harmonious, and the so-called “contrast” only refers to the contrast of melodies in terms of rhythm, tone pattern or character, while there is no mutual contradiction or conflicts, presenting the harmony between parts. The perfect blend of linear counterpoint and tonal harmony is well illustrated in the music of Bach, a composer of the Baroque era. In his *Musical Offering*, for example, the musical line itself is fluent and expressive. In addition, the harmony of the work is mainly reflected in its rich harmonic connotations. Moreover, the art of composing harmonies with lines to achieve the melodiousness and equilibrium is perfectly illustrated here. The melodic lines are weaved between different parts, so that each part is given a double meaning, and these parts are

permeated and connected to each other through the harmony. Therefore, no matter how complex the parts are, the logic of the harmonic progression and the overall development are clearly, so that the whole piece achieves a perfect concord between harmonies and lines, presenting an aesthetic feeling of aural tunefulness and perfection.

From the above analysis, it can be seen that the polyphonic novel emphasizes the confrontation and conflict in ideology, and the author intends to realize the polysemy and multiplicity in the ideological theme of the work through the contradiction in external color. Polyphonic music, on the other hand, expresses a sense of aural harmony and balance with contrasting melodies. Although polyphonic novel and polyphonic music share the same title of “polyphony”, they have completely distinct artistic qualities in their entirety.

#### **4. Epilogue: Literature and Music Sharing the Same Destination in Different Ways**

Although Bakhtin misinterprets the term “polyphony” in music to a certain extent, the above-mentioned differences between the two are not meant to deny or question the poetic theory of “polyphonic novel”. On the contrary, the author believes that Bakhtin’s cross-border application of the polyphony theory is of great practical relevance and exemplary role in the context of the growing trend of interdisciplinary dialogue and integration.

It cannot be neglected that in the present age of integrated media, the dialogue, communication and cooperation between different disciplines have reached an unprecedented level of popularity and intensity with the development and innovation of science and technology. Arguably, it has become the trend of the times to break down the barriers between disciplines and promote the integration of various domains. The new media industry is flourishing in digital, intelligent and technological aspects, which not only promotes the dramatic change of people’s daily life, but also makes the connection between various disciplines become closer. In addition, it has given rise to emerging integrated art forms such as online literature, online comics and online concerts. From this perspective, diversification of the arts is the long-term solution, as isolated and unilinear development would only make the traditional art disciplines confined to an isolated and stagnant state. As far as the development of traditional literature and music disciplines is concerned, both are in a “bottleneck” that is difficult to overcome. Whether it is “pure literature” or “pure music”, their living space has been seriously squeezed, and their association and interaction with other fields have not been substantially deepened or expanded. In fact, not only literature and music, but also all the traditional disciplines should eventually follow the same path of development, which is the path of interconnectivity, fusion and symbiosis. By examining the “interartistry” of various traditional art domains from the perspective of “intersexuality”, we can help break the shackles of art research in various categories and promote the evolutionary process of each discipline from single development to mutual integration. At the same time, it can create modern emerging art forms that are more applicable to the current circumstances, and enable the development, new changes and integration of traditional disciplines in the proper sense.

The traditional literature disciplines are suffering from an unprecedented marginalization crisis under the pressure of emerging industries. “In a time when visual, auditory, and other sensory stimuli are increasingly sought after, what is the value of literature and what is the driving force for its development (Yan, F., 2020, pp. 2-17)?” What is the future of traditional literature? The robot writes a poem, eliminating the talent of Peking University; Microsoft AI Xiaoice releases the first poetry collection.....More and more hot events like this are a silent reminder to every literary worker that an emerging era has arrived. Therefore, it is the future trend of traditional literature to have a vision of interdisciplinary exploration, to break down disciplinary barriers, and to promote dialogue and integration between literature and other fields, which is also the proper responsibility and primary task of every literary researcher.

Bakhtin’s cross-border application of the polyphony theory presents a fresh way of thinking for scholars to examine the interartistry between literature and other disciplines. At the same time, it also provides important insights for understanding and solving the challenges of the development of today’s literature. The right path for the interdisciplinary study of comparative literature is to adhere to the literature-oriented position, to be inclusive of different fields, which is the fundamental way for traditional literature to achieve diversified and all-round development.

#### **5. Conclusion**

In the context of the omni-media era, it is the trend of the times to explore the commonality of traditional art disciplines from an interdisciplinary perspective, in order to facilitate the dialogue and cooperation among various fields. In this regard, the author investigated the relationship between Bakhtin’s polyphonic novel and polyphonic music in the context of “intersexuality”, and examined the “interartistry” of the two. This paper intends to explore the limited connections, commonalities, and the greater heterogeneity of the two, so that it can provide a more extensive vision for the cross-border study of the polyphony theory. Moreover, the author

attempts to explore the potential space and more possibilities of interdisciplinary dialogue.

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