

# Marina Tsvetaeva. Lost in Translation

## Part 1. Music

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Mother deluged us with music. (We never again floated free from that music turned into Lyricism - out into the light of day!) Mother flooded us like an inundation. Her children, like those poor people's shacks on the banks of all great rivers, were doomed from their inception. Mother deluged us with all the bitterness of her own unrealized vocation, her own unrealized life, she deluged us with music as if with blood, the blood of a second birth.	Мать - залила нас музыкой. (Из этой Музыки, обернувшейся Лирикой, мы уже никогда не выплыли - на свет дня!) Мать затопила нас как наводнение. Ее дети, как те бараки нищих на берегу всех великих рек, отродясь были обречены. Мать залила нас всей горечью своего несбывшегося призвания, своей несбывшейся жизни, музыкой залила нас, как кровью, кровью второго рождения.
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3. Read the text and fill in the gaps to find out more about Marina Tsvetaeva's music preferences.

Marina Tsvetaeva's refined taste in music \_\_\_\_ (to allow) her to appreciate the whole range of genres from French Chanson to German folk melodies. Nevertheless, since she \_\_\_\_ (to be) a child, her allegiance \_\_\_\_ (to lie) with classical music.

Beethoven, Shuman, Shubert and Mozart \_\_\_\_ (to influence) Tsvetaeva's poetry greatly. Chopin's waltzes seemed \_\_\_\_ (to remind) her of her Polish grandmother, whose rom antic portrayal appeared in Marina's verses. Another musician Marina \_\_\_\_ (to admire) was Niccolò Paganini, the most celebrated violin virtuoso of his time.

As for Russian composers, Marina \_\_\_\_ (to prefer) her contemporaries: Sergei Rachmaninoff, Alexander Scriabin, Sergei Prokofiev, Igor Stravinsky, and Dmitri Shostakovich. Tsvetaeva enjoyed the music they \_\_\_\_\_ (to write) for theatre plays and she would go to their concerts quite a lot. Shostakovich, in his turn, \_\_\_\_\_ (to reciprocate) and set music to her poetry.

It is impossible to talk about Marina's musical preferences without mentioning Bedřich Smetana, a Czech composer, Edvard Grieg's romantic songs, gypsy songs sung by Anastasia Vyal'tseva, and funny simple songs by Maurice Chevalier.

4. Scan the QR code below to listen to *Elegie in E flat minor, Op. 3 №1* by Sergei Rachmaninoff, Marina Tsvetaeva's contemporary and one of her favourite composers. Answer the questions.

What feelings does this melody evoke?

Is it different from the music you listen to on a daily basis? In what way?

It is widely believed that a person's music preferences are closely connected to his or her inner world and emotions. How would you describe Marina Tsvetaeva based on the music she listened to? Do any of the facts of Marina's biography make you question your assumptions?

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## Part 2. Translation

*Есть нечто в стихах, что важнее их смысла: – их звучание.*

*М. И. Цветаева. Поэт и время*

1. Now that you have learnt about the role music played in Marina Tsvetaeva's life, it is time to learn about the impact of music on her poetry. Read the poem below. Who is it dedicated to? Do you think Marina's poems are difficult to translate?

Облака – вокруг,  
Купола – вокруг,  
Надо всей Москвой –  
Сколько хватит рук! –  
Возношу тебя, бремя лучшее,  
Деревцо мое  
Невесомое!

В дивном граде сем,  
В мирном граде сем,  
Где и мертвой мне  
Будет радостно, –  
Царевать тебе, горевать тебе,  
Принимать венец,  
О мой первенец!

Ты постом – говей,  
Не сурьми бровей,  
И все сорок – чти –  
Сороков церквей.  
Исходи пешком – молодым шажком! –  
Все привольное  
Семихолмие.

Будет твой черед:  
Тоже - дочери  
Передашь Москву  
С нежной горечью.  
Мне же - вольный сон, колокольный звон,  
Зори ранние  
На Ваганькове.

*31 марта 1916 г.*

2. Elaine Feinstein, a translator, wrote: "All translation is difficult; Tsvetaeva is a particularly difficult poet. No line-by-line version could catch her passionate, onward flow. And her pauses and sudden changes of speed were felt always against the deliberate constraint of the forms she had chosen."

Read and compare the translations below. Which one do you like most?

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Cloud-drift – all around,  
Cupolas – all round.  
For all Moscow – how  
Many hands go round! –  
I'll bear you on high, best of burdens, my  
Tender sapling, wee  
Featherlight-limbered tree.

In this dreamful town,  
In this peaceful town,  
Where for me to be  
Dead were bliss enow –  
It is yours to reign, yours to bear the pain,  
Yours to wear the crown,  
O, my firstborn own!

Keep – your fasting vows,  
Do not black your brows,  
To those forty times  
Forty churches – bow.  
Striding youthfully – wander through the free  
Wide expanse that spills  
Over seven hills.

Your turn will come too:  
Your own daughter you'll  
Hand to Moscow with  
Tender grief and rue.  
But – free dreams are mine, aye, and belfry chimes,  
Early dawning glow  
On Vagankovo.

*Translated by Robin Kemball*

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Clouds surround us,  
Cupolas surround us,  
Over all of Moscow  
How many hands will be enough!  
I lift you up,  
My favorite burden,  
Weightless sapling!

In this city of wonders,  
This peaceful city  
Where even dead  
I'll be happy.  
O my firstborn,  
You'll reign, suffer,  
And accept a crown!

As in Lent, fast,  
Don't smear antimony on your brows.  
Go to forty  
Of our forty churches.  
Walk around – slow and youthful –  
Over these seven  
Free hills.

Your turn will come.  
You'll also give Moscow,  
Gently and bitterly,  
To your daughters.  
As for me, a zone of unrestricted sleep,  
Bell sounds and early dawns  
In the graveyard of Vagankovo.

*Translated by Mary Maddock*

3. A short collection of Marina Tsvetaeva's poetry was translated into English by Ilya Kaminsky and Jean Valentine. In 2012 it was published under the title *Dark Elderberry Branch*.

Here are two reviews of the collection from [www.goodreads.com](http://www.goodreads.com). Read them and decide which one is more convincing. Would you like to get a copy of *Dark Elderberry Branch* for yourself?

## **Review A**

**Valerie** rated it \*\*\*\*\*

I was really excited to read this translation after I heard some of the poems read on the Poetry Magazine podcast. They were gorgeous. Jean Valentine and Ilya Kaminsky translated the book together. They didn't include the rhymes which were a big part of Tsvetaeva's work. I'm glad they didn't - when translations try to keep the rhymes, it seems really awkward and distracting to me.

Her poems seem fairly simple if you just look at the words. Nothing really fancy happens. The poems are passionate, and I got the idea that Tsvetaeva never felt anything half-way.

The book was great. My one complaint is the book is VERY short. It only had about 30 pages of poetry and was 50 pages all together. At the end, Kaminsky wrote some biographical information about Tsvetaeva, and I was glad to hear more information about her life. I hope the book does well and the two decide to translate more of her poems. I feel like I just got a tiny taste of her poems and I am greedy for more!

## **Review B**

**Sarah** rated it \*\*\*

Honestly, I'm disappointed in Dark Elderberry Branch. Its subtitle is "A Reading by Ilya Kaminsky and Jean Valentine," and I'd hoped for more by two such well known and fairly well-respected writers. However, what I got was a superficial sampling of the work of a great poet. Tsvetaeva deserves more than 30 pages of excerpts. I'm left frustrated with the feeling that there's too little



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