



Tchaikovsky, Pyotr Ilich (1840-1893)

by Robert Kellerman

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Pyotr Ilich Tchaikovsky.
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Pyotr Ilich Tchaikovsky was the leading composer of late nineteenth-century Russia, beloved for his ballet scores, symphonic poems, symphonies, operas, songs, piano music, and chamber works. He became one of the most popular composers in the world, inspiring a cult of gay admirers who detected in his work themes of forbidden love.

Until recently knowledge of Tchaikovsky's life as a homosexual was far less accessible than his music. Although some of his letters and diaries survive, many of his personal papers were suppressed, destroyed, or altered, especially during the Soviet period of Russian history.

Today most musicologists acknowledge the composer's homosexuality, but opinion concerning its importance and its relationship to his musical life varies widely.

Early Life

Tchaikovsky was born on May 7, 1840 to Ilya Petrovich Tchaikovsky and his second wife Aleksandra in Votinsk in the Ural Mountains. Sensitive and deeply devoted to his mother and family, Tchaikovsky was no musical prodigy as a child, despite his family's love of music and his own obvious talent. He was a high-strung but charming and attractive child.

A career in civil service was planned for him, so in 1850 Tchaikovsky entered the Imperial School of Jurisprudence in St. Petersburg, where he received both his secondary and higher education. Departing home for school was very difficult for him because of his extreme attachment to his mother. Her death from cholera in 1854 affected him deeply.

At school Tchaikovsky formed several close relationships with other male students, some of which may have been sexual or at least romantic. Numerous memoirs depict him as an angelic beauty surrounded by ardent admirers.

Tchaikovsky left the School of Jurisprudence in 1859. He accepted a position with the Department of Justice in St. Petersburg, but his civil service career ended abruptly in 1862 when he was passed over for a promotion.

Musical Education and Early Compositions

In September of 1862, Tchaikovsky matriculated at the new St. Petersburg Conservatory, where he matured as a composer astonishingly quickly. Upon completing his course of study in 1866, he began teaching at the new Moscow Conservatory, directed by Nikolay Rubinstein.

Tchaikovsky had the first of several nervous breakdowns in July 1866, brought on by the strain of teaching while working on his first critical success, the *First Symphony in G Minor, Winter Dreams*. In his earliest

major composition, Tchaikovsky's originality and inventiveness are already apparent.

Scholars disagree as to what to make of the young composer's sexuality during this early period. He certainly took seriously the negative social implications of being a known homosexual and he may have worried about the rumors of his homosexuality that flourished in the musical circles of St. Petersburg and Moscow, but such concerns did not stop him from moving in homosexual circles.

It has been suggested that in 1867 Tchaikovsky began a relationship with his private pupil Vladimir Shilovsky (who would later marry in 1877), a rich and temperamental young man, but he was also briefly involved with the Belgian soprano Désirée Artôt. The relationship with Artôt ended abruptly, perhaps terminated by the soprano's mother, who may have heard rumors of the composer's unorthodox sexual practices.

In 1871, Tchaikovsky took on a twelve-year-old servant Aleksey Sofronov, who became his traveling companion and eventually his lover. Sofronov, affectionately called "Aloysha," remained Tchaikovsky's servant, even after his own marriage, until his master's death.

Throughout this early and productive period of his career, Tchaikovsky lived in Moscow and produced many works: two more symphonies, three string quartets, various tone poems such as *Romeo and Juliet*, *The Tempest* (both 1873), and *Francesca da Rimini* (1876); piano music, songs, and early operas, and the incidental music for *The Snow Maiden* (1873) and the ballet *Swan Lake* (1875-1876).

Two Women

At this point two women figure prominently in Tchaikovsky's adult life: his patron Nadezhda von Meck and his wife Antonina Mulykova.

He received an admiring letter from the rich widow von Meck in 1877, which began a deep personal relationship conducted entirely by correspondence. In fact, the two agreed never to meet. Von Meck proved an invaluable ally to him in the years ahead.

Also in 1877, Tchaikovsky entered into a disastrous marriage with Mulykova, a conservatory student who also wrote him admiring letters. He apparently hoped that his marriage would "cure" his homosexuality or at least dispel the rumors of his homosexuality. No doubt, the fact that Mulykova was wealthy also contributed to his decision to marry, for he was unhappy having to support himself by teaching.

The marriage was not successful. Tchaikovsky found his pretty bride utterly unattractive and he was unable to consummate the union. Wracked with guilt over his deception of his wife, he began drinking heavily and may have attempted suicide. He suffered another nervous breakdown.

Two months after the wedding, while the composer recuperated in Switzerland, a separation was announced. Mulykova never divorced Tchaikovsky, and she demanded money from him thereafter. In 1896, after Tchaikovsky's death, and after having borne three illegitimate children, she was confined to an insane asylum.

From the trauma of 1877 came the great *Fourth Symphony*, as well as the opera *Eugene Onegin*, whose plot--a worldly young man spurning a girl who declares her love in a letter--has parallels in his own life. Several scholars have argued that the anguish expressed in the autobiographical *Fourth Symphony* reflects the composer's despair at his homosexuality. It may additionally (or alternatively) express his despair at the complications of his ill-advised marriage.

The Middle Period

In 1878, with the financial patronage of von Meck, Tchaikovsky left teaching to devote more time to

composition. The works that followed included his major sacred works, the *1812 Overture* and the *Serenade for Strings* (1880), the *Manfred Symphony* (1885), and various orchestral suites. His final operas included *The Maid of Orleans* (1878-1879), whose story of Joan of Arc had fascinated him since childhood, and *Mazeppa* (1881-1883).

Accolades came late to Tchaikovsky. He received recognition in 1881 from the new Tsar Alexander II, who ascended the throne that year. In 1888, his successor Alexander III, for whom Tchaikovsky wrote the *Coronation March*, awarded the composer a generous lifetime pension.

Freed from teaching, Tchaikovsky traveled extensively. He undertook a series of European tours in the late 1880s and an even more successful American tour in 1891, where he conducted his own work at the opening of New York's Carnegie Hall.

In the 1890s, Tchaikovsky's works began being performed regularly at home and abroad. Indeed, he became a cult figure, especially among homosexuals, who discerned in his music a tragic yearning that they found particularly resonant.

The Final Works

Tchaikovsky's final works were composed abroad, among them orchestral suites, the magnificent *Fifth Symphony* (1888), the ballet score *The Sleeping Beauty* and the opera *The Queen of Spades* (1890), the ballet score *The Nutcracker* (1891), and the final *Sixth Symphony Pathétique* (1893), lovingly dedicated to his gay nephew Vladimir ("Bob") Davidov, to whom he was extremely close.

Symphony Pathétique almost immediately became the subject of intense speculation, especially among homosexuals, who felt that this mysterious work depicts a homosexual's search for love. It has been suggested that the symphony was inspired by Tchaikovsky's passion for Davidov.

His Final Years and Death

After years of travel, Tchaikovsky returned to Russia. He first rented various houses around Kiln, near Moscow. His final year was spent in St. Petersburg, where he died in 1893, a victim of a cholera epidemic that swept the city. He was surrounded by Davidov, his servant "Aloysa," his brother Modest, and a retinue of young men.

Although Tchaikovsky's death from cholera is well documented, some biographers--largely on the basis of scurrilous rumors--have suggested that the composer was forced to commit suicide rather than be exposed in a sex scandal involving a member of the Imperial family. The biographical works by Alexander Poznansky have attempted to rescue Tchaikovsky from such sensational scandal, but the circumstances of the composer's death continue to be debated.

Sexuality and Music

The importance of Tchaikovsky's sexuality to his music is also a matter of considerable debate. In general, heterosexual musicologists tend to downplay or deny its importance, while queer historians and biographers highlight it in two ways. They argue that events in the composer's life are reflected in his music and that specific musical elements found in his scores are typically "gay."

Because music is perhaps the most purely objective of the arts, the level to which a composer casts his own life into his compositions is very much a matter of subjective opinion. However, it is certainly true that many gay men and lesbians have found in Tchaikovsky's music emotions that seemed to speak directly to their own experience. Hence, he has been an important presence in gay and lesbian history and culture.

While discussion continues as to the significance of Tchaikovsky's homosexuality to his music, there is now general agreement that he was in fact homosexual. This itself represents an enormous change in musicological scholarship, which has tended to be cautious and conservative in matters of sexuality, especially when it comes to composers as important as Handel and Tchaikovsky, whose achievements are central to classical music and to the Western cultural tradition.

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About the Author

Robert Kellerman holds a doctorate in English literature from Michigan State University.