

Review

Tchaikovsky's Pathétique and Russian Culture, by Marina Ritzarev. Farnham: Ashgate, 2014. 169 pp. including bibliography and index.

Back in high school days—sometime in the 1970s—Tchaikovsky's was the most uncool music, the one whose name never should be mentioned lest one wished to be ridiculed in public. As far as we were concerned, as 16-year-old music intellectuals, only old people and riff-raff concertgoers enjoyed the composer's kitschy ballets, greasily swaying melodies, and oversweet harmonies. With superior scorn, we watched the poor public taste roll in the streets, corrupting souls into a despicable hedonistic enjoyment of music. We swore in the name of the Second Viennese School, admired esoteric medieval music, and delighted ourselves with Corelli's trio sonatas. Spirits that were more forgiving indulged in Bach's allegedly mathematical thought and Mozart's sublime pitch combinations. Yet, anything composed after 1800 and before 1900 was regarded as pure *schmalz*. Nevertheless, some social pariahs stubbornly insisted on listening—and on shamelessly loving!—Tchaikovsky's rich harmonies and his profound, expressive melodies. But they were wrong, we all knew that.

Ironically, during those dark ages of atonal dictatorship, musical sanity survived in the most unlikely environment: Soviet Russia. Physically and psychologically tortured by an inhuman regime, Russian musicians and musicologists did not forsake their musical sensitivity. They openly and unapologetically listened, enjoyed, studied, and wrote about Tchaikovsky. More ironically still, they were not only *allowed*, but actually *encouraged* to love Tchaikovsky, albeit for all the wrong reasons.¹ Present-day Russian scholarship preserved the love, the knowledge, and further scholarly study of Tchaikovsky's life and music.

Russian literature on Tchaikovsky is vast. It starts almost immediately after his death with the memoirs of his brother, Modest Tchaikovsky, in three volumes (1894, 1896, and 1903). Ivan Klimentov, Tchaikovsky's friend, followed with his own reminiscences (1908) and "a short biographical sketch" of the composer (Saint Petersburg, 1909). This seems to have been the last pre-revolutionary publication about Tchaikovsky. The chaotic years of World War I, the October Revolution and the Civil War that followed did not favor an expansive production of scholarly work. Nevertheless, and even during times that did not favor Tchaikovsky—an "anti-revolutionary" according to early Soviet views—Boris Asafiev published the first scholarly biography of the composer, in the same city that already carried a different name (Petrograd, 1922). Twenty-five years later the book was translated into English (New York: Philosophical Library, 1947). Once Tchaikovsky's name was, at least partly, rehabilitated in Soviet Russia, a constant flow of both biographical and analytical studies appeared in Russian: Berberova's biography was published in the same year with Zhitomirsky's studies of the composer's music (1936, translated into English in 1947), shortly thereafter followed by

¹ Tchaikovsky was frowned upon immediately after the October Revolution, since he was considered a supporter of the Tsarist regime. This approach, however, was quickly forsaken.

Bogdanov-Berezovsky's and Yarustovsky's books (1940). These were followed by Elena Orlova's thesis on Tchaikovsky's Romances (1948), Arnold Alshvang's monumental monograph (1959, 1967 and 1970), Galina Tyumeneva's booklet on Tchaikovsky and the Ukraine (1955), Vladimir Protopopov and Nadezhda Tumanina's book on Tchaikovsky's operas (1957), and two biographical volumes by Tumanina (1962 and 1968). Ironically, it seems that the stream of Russian publications on the composer subsided after the 1970s, and that musicological interest—albeit only biographical to start with—moved to the West.

It was only in 1945, almost fifty years after the composer's death, that the first significant book in English about Tchaikovsky was published. In a series of papers, the result of a Tchaikovsky symposium (marking, in 1943, the 50th anniversary of the composer's death), collected in a volume edited by Gerald Abraham and written by contemporary musicological luminaries such as Edward Lockspeiser, Eric Blom, Arnold Alshvang and Abraham himself, the music and life of Tchaikovsky were described rather than explained. Thereafter, Western interest in Tchaikovsky seems to have waned for almost twenty-five years. Two books by John Warrack, mainly directed at the general public and concert audience, were published in 1969 and 1973. Then appeared the four masterful, meticulously prepared volumes on the composer by David Brown (1978, 1983, 1986 and 1991, followed by a 2007 condensed volume), representing a life-long project of the musicologist, whose work became a starting point for every future Tchaikovsky research.

Tchaikovsky scholarship in the last two decades has been enhanced significantly by the accessibility of Russian archives, formerly unavailable to Western scholars. Alexander Poznansky's *Tchaikovsky: The Quest for the Inner Man* (1991) was followed by his other books and articles, which presented an uncensored Tchaikovsky to the West; Russian scholars, such as Polina Vaydman and Valery Sokolov, constantly publish previously unknown and/or censored biographical materials. Roland John Wiley's *Tchaikovsky* (2009), following his article on the composer in the *New Grove Dictionary* (2001) and his accessible *Tchaikovsky's Ballets* (1985, 1991) provide an updated and unapologetic general view of the composer; Richard Taruskin's section on Tchaikovsky and his music, in his 1997 *Defining Russia Musically*, is particularly intriguing.² Finally, Brett Langston's and Alexander Poznansky's grandiose *Tchaikovsky Handbook* (in two volumes) present respectively a new thematic catalogue of works and a catalogue of letters; genealogy and updated bibliography (2001-2002, digitized in 2010), providing a solid scholarly basis for further studies. The composer's music was freshly reviewed in Henry Zajackowski's *Tchaikovsky's Musical Style* (1987), while the contributors of the 1998 *Tchaikovsky and His World*, edited by Leslie Kearney, and of the 1999 *Tchaikovsky and His Contemporaries: A Centennial Symposium*, edited by Alexandar Mihailovic, highlighted many other new facets of his work.

Thus, thankfully, Cologne's Wall of Modernism is slowly but surely sinking into a blessed mist of oblivion, and dignity for all types of music has been reinstated. Tchaikovsky's lovers can sigh in relief for their favorite composer, who has regained his

2 *Defining Russia Musically: Historical and Hermeneutical Essays* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997), 239-307. This chapter is reprinted partly in Vol. II of Taruskin's more recent, five-volume *Oxford History of Music*.

place in the music canon. True, ridiculous caveats concerning the alleged worthlessness of Tchaikovsky's music still appear from time to time,³ but, thankfully, not for long—particularly not since 1993, which marked the centenary of the composer's death. Unlike Abraham's single volume of 1945, this anniversary rendered a rich biographical crop, tending more and more toward psychological inquiry,⁴ but also a new "genre" that gained musicological popularity in other fields, too: the deep inspection and analysis of the cultural and historical context, and specific musical characteristics and traits, of individual compositions. A particular focal point was Tchaikovsky's Symphony No. 6, a pinnacle of the composer's creative output, around which a wealth of rumors and legends seem to exist. The first attempt in this direction was Timothy Jackson's 1999 book.⁵ Sadly, like many other studies of the 1990s, Jackson was caught in the muddy trap of gender studies. Tchaikovsky was homosexual, and this fact was sheer candy for scandal hunters, who could not wait to render a paparazzi view of the great composer. Relating every aspect of the symphony to the composer's homosexuality, Jackson's book reached unsustainable conclusions.

With such a background, where pseudo-psychology and political correctness competed in claiming ownership over the composer's life and oeuvre, it is refreshing and encouraging to read Marina Ritzarev's new book on the *Pathétique*. The book offers a new, fresh angle, which, while safely grounded in factual and historical research into Russian culture, does not lose the imaginative and innovative touch that provides interest and excitement to the reading process. This book is unique: there is no similar study of Tchaikovsky's Sixth Symphony. I offer to review Marina Ritzarev's new book with as much objectivity and scholarly approach as my ingenuity may permit regarding a book written by my closest friend, who shared her ideas with me from the very beginning of her research for this book. I hereby cannot claim objectivity, because, as we all well know, there is no such thing as objective writing.

Ritzarev's writing stems from the twentieth-century Russian scholarly culture. She is patient and thorough but yet inquisitive and imaginative. Free from the shackles of pure positivism, she asks puzzling questions, and succeeds in providing quite convincing answers. She constructs a contextualized story. Her imaginative writing is not just let loose to run wild but, like a good detective story, is based on connecting small pieces of a large puzzle, creating a picture that is both convincing and entrancing, consistently and meticulously keeping a non-judgmental, curious, open-to-new-ideas approach. The result is fascinating.

3 See, for example, Allan Kozinn's "Critic's Notebook; Defending Tchaikovsky, with Gravity and with Froth" in *The New York Times* (18 July 1992), <http://www.nytimes.com/1992/07/18/arts/critic-s-notebook-defending-tchaikovsky-with-gravity-and-with-froth.html?ref=peterilyichtchaikovsky>, accessed 9 November 2014.

4 Alexandra Orlova's controversial book on Tchaikovsky's death, translated into English in 1990; Alexander Poznansky's books from 1991, 1997, 2007, and 2009, offering new outlooks on the composer's life and death; Valery Sokolov's 1994 book on Tchaikovsky's illness and death; Anthony Holden's and Nina Berberova's biographies of the composer (1995 and 1997, respectively), and the biographical essays in Leslie Kearney's fascinating anthology (1998).

5 Timothy Jackson, *Tchaikovsky Symphony No. 6 (Pathétique)* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999).

The twelve chapters of the book are divided into two large sections, six chapters in each. The first section provides the contextual historical and cultural background. The readers learn about the puzzle that the Symphony poses and about former attempts to solve it. They are then led to the story of Tchaikovsky's enthrallment with the figure of Jesus—as a person and as the Christ figure, which is then positioned within the general Russian cultural approach to Christ, Christianity, and the concepts of Compassion and Forgiveness. Is, then, this symphony a programmatic work? Ritzarev hints at this in her first chapter, where she recalls the secrecy that surrounded this symphony and its supposed program. Was it connected to Tchaikovsky's nephew, Vladimir ("Bob") Davidov, to whom he wrote about "a secret program" of this symphony, and their alleged relationship, as Jackson supposed? Ritzarev is not persuaded, offering instead a different interpretation, one that points at a more spiritual, intellectual, and emotional relationship, of a nature that may appeal less to scandal hunters but that actually sounds more convincing. She points at the deep admiration that Tchaikovsky felt toward the *human* figure of Jesus, proposing a program for the symphony: the story of the *Passion of Christ*.

This is an extremely daring scheme of interpretation. Ritzarev lifts the gauntlet she had thrown to herself and, dedicating to it the second half of her book, engages in a meticulous and thorough description and analysis of the symphony, connecting the dots and attaching one piece to the other, forming a coherent picture of Tchaikovsky's Sixth Symphony as a musical storytelling of the Passion. This part of the book is enriched with dozens of musical examples that are described and analyzed in the text to substantiate the author's arguments.

The book has one weak point, though—its non-idiomatic English. I not only sympathize, but also personally identify with the challenge posed to any non-native English speaker who embarks on writing a book in English. One's mother tongue is like the home one was born in: it has its cozy corners, its smells, shadows, its doorknobs and locks that only answer to a particular pressure, gentle lift, sensitive turn of the key—the person who was born in it and who breathes its air, he alone knows the touch. An author may possess a wealth of knowledge and inspiration to share, but lack of fluency and idiomatic expressions will always remain an inhibiting factor. While English is, indeed, the lingua franca of today's scholarly world, it is not equally natural to each one of us. This is where a good language editor could—and should—make a significant contribution. Clearly, it can be quite difficult to find a professional language editor who is familiar with the author's linguistic origins and also with the two disciplines to which she answers—Music and history.

Nevertheless, even when the reading process is slowed down due to some non-idiomatic awkwardness, the book's content surmounts linguistic barriers. Marina Ritzarev's *Tchaikovsky's Pathétique and Russian Culture* provides a historical, cultural, and personal context of Tchaikovsky and his social environment, delves into the general structure and various details of the score, and surrounds all this with an original and exciting new interpretation of this composition and its composer. The rich bibliography and index make the reading of the book not only comfortable but also accessible and useful for further research.

ESTI SHEINBERG