

[1] **Pyotr Il'yich Tchaikovsky**
in Words and Music

Written by Davinia Caddy

Read by Nicholas Boulton

[2] **Pyotr Il'yich Tchaikovsky (1840–1893)**

Swan Lake, Op. 20, Act II – By a Lake: Scene – The swans swim on the lake

from Naxos 8.553271 Track 9

[3] Can there be music more instantly recognizable, more wildly popular, more beautifully scored? Pyotr Il'yich Tchaikovsky's 1876 ballet *Swan Lake* is nowadays considered a classic. Captivating audiences with its haunting oboe theme and shuddering string accompaniment, the work has found a home not only in the theatre and concert hall, but in popular entertainment, film and television. Who among hip-hop fans can forget the music-box version of the 'Swan Lake Suite' sampled in Beyoncé's 2016 studio album *Lemonade*? Who among film buffs can ignore the live-action performance of the ballet that features prominently in Darren Aronofsky's 2010 psychological thriller *Black Swan*? This is not to mention the puppet shows, circus adaptations and computer animations aimed at a younger audience, including the popular 2003 straight-to-video release, *Barbie of Swan Lake*.

Certainly, Tchaikovsky's ballet has found an enduring place within the classical music canon (that imaginary museum of 'great' works), as well as within the wider cultural consciousness (our collective musical memory). A huge theatrical achievement, *Swan Lake* is thought to have redefined the status of music in ballet (long considered second-rate), not to mention the status of ballet in a theatrical scene traditionally dominated by Western European Grand Opera. But even a cursory glance at the historical record paints a more complex picture. For when *Swan Lake* premiered on 4th March 1877 at the

Bolshoi Theatre in Moscow (having been commissioned in 1875 by the Russian Imperial Theatre Directorate), it received a frosty reception. The dancing, by the Czech choreographer Julius Reisinger, was unimaginative; the principal role, performed by the company's second ballerina Pelageya Karpakova, was unconvincing; the conductor, Stepan Ryabov, appeared insecure on the rostrum; and the stage designs, by Karl Valts (Acts Two and Four), Ivan Shangin (Act One) and Karl Gropius (Act Three), lacked inspiration. Critics also commented negatively on what we might describe as *Swan Lake's* 'pick-n'-mix' structure: while ostensibly new and original, the work featured dance movements borrowed from other ballets, detached from their intended context and interpolated into the loosely-stitched fabric of the new danced drama.

But perhaps most shocking, at least from a modern-day perspective, was the criticism aimed at Tchaikovsky's score. Yes, almost 150 years on, we might find much to praise, beginning with the abundance of melody, always elegant in contour, charming in spirit and perfectly balanced in phrase length and form. Then there is the music's atmospheric moodiness, expertly captured by Tchaikovsky's vivid orchestration. This is not to mention the composer's mastery of *musique dansante* – a style, influenced by French ballet composers Adolphe Adam and Léo Délibes, that seems to complement and even inspire physical motion. (*Swan Lake*, as we so often read in CD sleeves and programme notes, offers a 'perfect synthesis' of music and movement.) But, back in 1877, critics held an almost diametrically opposed point of view. Far from graceful and poised, Tchaikovsky's music was thought too complicated for dancing, too Wagnerian in style, too symphonic in scale, and simply too loud. What is more, the relationship between music and choreography seemed strained – not harmonious and empathetic, as we might expect. (Indeed, there exists no historical evidence of the nature and extent of any collaboration between Tchaikovsky and Reisinger.) A critic for the *St Petersburg News* reflected on the perceived discrepancy:

'In some places, soloists and corps de ballet are positively at odds with the orchestra, and you see that it could not be otherwise: the melody is too... how can I say it? Too confused, too capricious – in a word, it was not written "balletically".'

The disjunction is obvious. Not only between the music and the dancing in the ballet, but between our present-day perspective and that shared by members of the audience at the premiere. Interestingly, this tension between viewpoints extends to our understanding of Tchaikovsky's musical personality, his creative identity and artistic appeal. While it is almost universally acknowledged that the composer was very much an individualist (he avoided alliances, turned his back on manifestos and crafted no compositional recipe for others to follow), the essence of his music has been hotly debated. Some listeners have found *Swan Lake* and other full orchestral works to be fundamentally European, couched in the grand symphonic style of German composers Ludwig van Beethoven and Robert Schumann, while injected with an intense dose of drama as in the programmatic music of Franz Liszt and Hector Berlioz. Others have found Tchaikovsky to be an ardent Russian, his music invested with a primal quality and intense national fervour – a perfect embodiment of Slavic culture and folk traditions. Yet another group of listeners has thought that Tchaikovsky, ironically, was *not Russian enough*: that his music, some distance from the primitive crudity favoured by his contemporaries known as 'The Five', was irrelevant, failing to embody an authentically Russian national character. A further group, particularly critical of the composer, has pointed to intemperance and overkill, decrying Tchaikovsky's music as guilty of the worst excesses of Western Romanticism: self-indulgent melancholy, out-of-control passion, irrationality and hot-headedness. This is not to mention the legions of Tchaikovsky fans who have long listened to the composer's music as *biography*, daring to find connections between the composer's art and his life – in particular, his seemingly fragile character and his sexual orientation. Legions of books and articles have been written about Tchaikovsky, 'The Man and the Music': the two, it seems, are irrevocably intertwined.

[4] **Marche slave ('Slavonic March'), Op. 31**

from Naxos 8.550191 Track 5

- [5] We heard an extract from Tchaikovsky's 1876 orchestral piece *Marche Slave* (Slavonic March), written in response to a request from the Russian musician Nikolay Rubinstein for a work to be played at a Moscow charity concert for Serbian victims of the Serbian-Ottoman War. Dubbed 'Serbo-Russian March' by the composer, acknowledging the

support offered to the Serbs by the Russians, the piece borrows traditional music from both territories: folk songs from Serbia; and the Russian national anthem, 'God Save the Tsar'. In the end, it's a blazing, carousing and unashamedly celebratory work – a tremendous storm, in Tchaikovsky's words, 'of patriotic enthusiasm'.

The *Marche Slave* also offers a useful starting point in our journey through the composer's life, given his family's military credentials. Tchaikovsky's father, Il'ya Petrovich, served as a Lieutenant Colonel and engineer in the Department of Mines; his grandfather had been a medical assistant in the army and then governor of the city of Glazov in Vyatka Province; and his great-grandfather had fought for Peter the Great against the Swedes in the 1709 Battle of Poltava. Incidentally, it was this great-grandfather, known for his ability to imitate the call of a seagull (a *tchaika*), who lent the family its name: the noble suffix '-sky' was conferred in recognition of his military service.

Born on 7th May 1840 in the small town of Kamsko-Votkinsk, in the Vyatka province, Tchaikovsky was destined for a career, not in the military, but in the civil service. At the young age of 10, he entered the preparatory boarding school of St Petersburg's School of Jurisprudence, one of the most esteemed schools in the city. He had been prepared academically by the family governess Anastasya Petrovna Petrova, and, before her, by the young Fanny Dürbach (only 22 when employed), a source of considerable information about the composer's early education, as well as his childhood more generally. It is from Dürbach, for example, that we learn of Tchaikovsky's advanced reading and writing skills. 'Le petit Pouchkine' (the little Pushkin) as she called him, Tchaikovsky read both French and German, and he wrote in a variety of formats – poetry, prayer, historical chronicle (of Joan of Arc) and essays on metaphysical topics – remarkable achievements for a child of only 7 or 8, especially one living at the time in rural Russia, far from the urban civilization of St Petersburg. It is also from Dürbach that we learn of what would become one of Tchaikovsky's most distinctive traits, his sensitivity of character. Reflecting on his childhood exploits on the piano (Tchaikovsky studied with a private tutor called Mariya Palchikova), Dürbach admits:

'After work or long periods of letting his imagination loose at the piano, he was always nervy and edgy.'

Dürbach recalls a similar disquiet in the young musician following a musical soirée in the family home:

'When I went to the nursery, he was not asleep; instead, his eyes were glistening, he was weeping agitatedly. When I asked what was the matter with him, he replied "Oh it's this music! It's here, here", said the boy, weeping and pointing to his head. "It won't give me any peace".'

A happier musical memory is provided by one of Tchaikovsky's younger brothers, Modest, a man who would go on to write an influential biography of the composer. Modest recalled Tchaikovsky's interest in an instrument purchased by their father in St Petersburg: an 'orchestron' or barrel organ that could simulate a range of orchestral effects:

'He was particularly captivated by the pieces of Mozart that it played. The composer himself repeatedly asserted that his passionate worship of that genius had its beginning in the unspoken delight, that "holy rapture" which he had experienced during his early childhood on hearing the orchestron play Zerlina's aria "Vedrai carino" and other excerpts from Don Giovanni.'

[6] **Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart** (1756–1791)

Don Giovanni – Act II, Scene 6: Aria – Vedrai, carino ('You will see, my dear')

from Naxos 8.660080-82 Disc 2 Track 24

[7] Tchaikovsky's arrival at the preparatory school in St Petersburg, some 1000 miles from the family home in Alapayevsk (a provincial town on the eastern slopes of the Ural Mountains), has gone down in history as another example – indeed, a prime example – of his nervous, almost hysterical disposition. For when the young boy's mother

Aleksandra Andreyevna came to say her goodbyes and return home, a heart-wrenching scene played out. As Modest describes:

'With the arrival at the place of departure, he lost all self-possession. Pressing himself to his mother, he could not tear himself away from her.... She got into the carriage... the horses started, whereupon, summoning his utmost strength, the boy broke away... and rushed with a cry of mad despair after the tarantass [a Russian horse-drawn carriage], trying to seize the footboard, the mudguards, whatever he could, in the vain hope of stopping it.'

Unfortunately, this was not the only traumatic incident related to his mother that Tchaikovsky endured during his formative years. On 25th June 1854, two years into his time at the senior School of Jurisprudence, Tchaikovsky's mother died from cholera. According to some biographers, such was the distress caused by this event that it would haunt Tchaikovsky for the rest of his life.

Nonetheless, he seemed settled and successful at school: amiable, well-liked and well-behaved, if perhaps a little absent-minded. The School helped further his musical education to a certain extent, sponsoring concerts by leading musicians; and offering opportunities for solo and choral singing in church services. But Tchaikovsky once again benefited from private music tuition. The Italian Luigi Piccioli continued his training in singing; his aunt introduced Italian opera; and the German pianist Rudolf Kündinger gave lessons at the keyboard. Kündinger's impressions of the now-teenage Tchaikovsky are worth quoting at length:

'If I could foresee who would come of the jurist of that time, I would have kept a diary of our lessons, but unfortunately it must be said that then it never entered my head what kind of musician I was dealing with. No doubt his abilities were outstanding: an amazing subtlety of ear, memory, excellent hands, but this gave no cause to foresee either the composer or even a brilliant performer. There was nothing phenomenal in him.... When Tchaikovsky's father once asked my opinion if

*it was worth it for his son to devote himself to music – I answered in the negative....
At the time I had no belief in Tchaikovsky's exceptional talent.'*

While making little impression on his piano tutor during these crucial years, Tchaikovsky also tried his hand at composition. By all reports he had grand ambitions: at the age of 14 he planned an opera, titled *Hyberbole*, a one-act farce for which there remains a libretto but no musical score. He also turned to smaller-scale forms, particularly the song – a genre with which listeners nowadays might not associate the composer. Yet Tchaikovsky wrote around 100 songs, the first surviving example of which dates from these teenage years – the last from the year of his death (1893). His first song was the romance 'My Genius, My Angel, My Friend', based on the first of four poems in a cycle called 'To Ophelia' by the renowned Russian writer Afanasy Fet. The text recounts a one-way conversation between the narrator and an idealized companion:

*'You're here, aren't you, light spirit,
My genius, my angel, my friend.
Whispering to me in conversation,
As you quietly circle in flight?
You favour me with shy inspiration,
Your powers heal my sweet affliction,
You grant a quiet dream to my imagination,
My genius, my angel, my friend.'*

While Modest called the song 'a mere empty amateur effusion', later commentators have been more complimentary, applauding the composer for his 'remarkable sensitivity' to the poet's text. Indeed, the song seems to epitomize a concept introduced by Tchaikovsky expert and biographer Roland John Wiley, '*prelest*': that is, music's charming, seductive aspect. Listen to the gently persistent repeated notes at the outset, the hypnotic, throbbing bass; and then the ending, in which the voice sings a sequence of falling phrases, fading into nothing as if the music itself drifts off to sleep.

[8] **Pyotr Il'yich Tchaikovsky**

Moy geniy, moy angel, moy drug ('My Genius, My Angel, My Friend')

from Naxos 8.555371 Track 2

- [9] Tchaikovsky graduated from the School of Jurisprudence on 25th May 1859 and almost immediately took up paid employment within the Ministry of Justice. An attentive and diligent worker, he also enjoyed an active social life, including the various musical entertainments St Petersburg had to offer: French theatre, Italian opera – he even participated in amateur theatre as a comic and mime. It was also around this time that Tchaikovsky had his first real exposure to European society, as he accompanied one of his father's friends around Western Europe acting as a translator.

At this stage in his career, Tchaikovsky appears to have been somewhat downcast about his musical prospects. In a letter to his sister Aleksandra (known as Sasha), he wrote:

'Papa claims that it is still not too late to become an artist. If that were so, it would be excellent, but the fact is, if there is talent in me it is now probably impossible to develop. They have made me a bureaucrat.'

What seems to have given a boost to the young bureaucrat's artistic aspirations was an event that took place in November 1859: the inauguration of the Russian Musical Society, a concert-giving organization that also offered, from spring 1860, music tuition. The brainchild of Anton Rubinstein, a 29-year-old pianist, pedagogue and composer, the Society also had the support of the Grand Duchess Elena Pavlovna, the German-born aunt of Tsar Alexander II. With such esteemed backing, the Society aimed to provide something that was sorely missing at the time in St Petersburg: an expressly Russian culture of concert music and opera – that is, a classical tradition of similar stature and importance to the already existing traditions of Russian folk music and music for the Russian Orthodox Church.

Thus began Tchaikovsky's professional training in music: in August 1861 he enrolled in a music theory class given by Nikolay Ivanovich Zarembo, a tutor with a strong German musical heritage. Yet these classes with Zarembo were merely a precursor to something more substantial: his enrolment, in October 1862, in the Russian Musical Society's recently opened 'music school', the St Petersburg Conservatory. Here, under the leadership of Anton Rubinstein, Tchaikovsky would study for almost three years – and, at least initially, while working at the Ministry of Justice.

Studying piano, flute, organ, music theory, improvisation and free composition (the last with Rubinstein himself), Tchaikovsky appears to have quickly developed a more positive attitude towards his musical future. Writing to Sasha in a letter of April 1863, he described his forsaking of 'worldly pleasures, fancy clothes, etc.' in favour of a specifically musical direction:

'Of one thing only am I certain: that an excellent musician will come of me, and that I shall always have my daily bread.'

Such was Tchaikovsky's new-found determination to pursue a career in music that, in 1863, he took the ambitious step of resigning from the Ministry of Justice and becoming a full-time student at the Conservatory. Composition seems to have been the main drawcard, as Tchaikovsky embarked on a number of large-scale works – assignments and examination pieces for his tutors. Notable among these is the graduation cantata *Ode to Joy*, a setting for orchestra and voices of Schiller's text – famous as the basis of the choral finale of Beethoven's Symphony No. 9. Tchaikovsky seems not to have thought much of his own efforts; and, according to sources, he did not even bother to turn up to his piece's first performance – something that angered Rubinstein. Negative feeling of a different kind was exhibited by composer and critic César Cui, a member of the nationalist 'Five', in his response to the budding composer's prescribed work:

'The Conservatoire composer, Mr Tchaikovsky, is utterly feeble. It is true that his composition, a cantata, was written under the most unfavourable circumstances: to order, to a deadline, on a given subject, and with adherence to familiar forms. Yet,

all the same, if he had any gift, then at least somewhere or other it would have broken through the fetters of the Conservatory.'

Another assessed academic piece from Tchaikovsky's Conservatory years also prompted extreme criticism – this time from Rubinstein himself. Based on a play by Alexander Nikolayevich Ostrovsky, Tchaikovsky's orchestral overture *The Storm* was far from conventional in form and thematic design. Indeed, the work seemed to have been modelled not on Western symphonic structure, with carefully proportioned and balanced sections, and attendant shifts in chords and keys. The overture instead, written for an extravagantly large orchestra, was based on the dramatic plot of the source play – its twists and turns, and its amorous allegiances. Full of juxtapositions between contrasting themes and harmonic irregularities, the work enraged Rubinstein. Tchaikovsky, remarkably, seems to have foreseen his tutor's anger, calling on his friend Herman Laroche to deliver the manuscript to Rubinstein and to receive his verdict on it. Laroche described the scenario:

'Never in my life have I been so taken to task for my own actions as I was here, for the "sins" of someone else.'

Rubinstein, Laroche recalled, had lectured:

'If you had dared to place such a piece before me as your own work.'

But then the master seemed to calm his fury:

'As the irascible director's reserves of anger had thus been exhausted and nothing was left for the real guilty party, Tchaikovsky could risk putting in an appearance a few days later to hear the judgement for himself. He was received with all civility and was only confronted with a few gentle reproaches.'

Double standards, indeed. But we might wonder what there was to complain about, at least at the outset of the overture. Here, according to the composer's own scribbled

notes, the atmosphere – ‘uneasiness and malaise’ – is established, as is the main theme of the heroine Katerina, a lilting, pastoral and quite attractive folk tune.

[10] **Groza ('The Storm'), Overture, Op. 76**

from Naxos 8.550716 Track 5

[11] On graduation at the end of 1865, Tchaikovsky was offered the role of music theory teacher at the soon-to-open Moscow Conservatory, a parallel institution to that in which he had trained in St Petersburg. Indeed, this new Moscow venture was directed by Anton Rubinstein's younger brother Nikolay, an esteemed pianist and public figure in Moscow. Having accepted the offer, which came with temporary lodgings within Nikolay's home, Tchaikovsky settled in Moscow in January 1866 and commenced teaching almost immediately. He soon made important friends among the musical establishment: not only Nikolay himself; but Pyotr Jürgenson, a music publisher who would also become a financial backer; and Nikolay Kashkin, another professor at the Conservatory as well as a press critic. In addition, Tchaikovsky continued to enjoy an active social life, having been introduced by his new boss to the so-called 'Artistic Circle', a social club for the elite of Moscow society that offered food and drink, entertainment and lively conversation. His friends recall Tchaikovsky as a prankster, improvising comic skits and routines, dancing and singing – a far cry from the image of the tortured genius that history has handed down to us.

Another fact that sheds a new and interesting light on Tchaikovsky's life at this time concerns his romantic relations. Yes, there was and still is much speculation about his sexual proclivities: he identified as homosexual and openly associated with homosexuals through friendships and professional connections. But he also confessed a desire to marry, embarking on a relationship with one Désirée Artôt, a Belgian mezzo-soprano to whom Tchaikovsky had been introduced in 1868 during her Moscow tour with the Italian Opera Company. Tchaikovsky's proposal of marriage was accepted by Artôt almost immediately and, according to some accounts, the composer started musing on names for their children. But the relationship soon fizzled out, Artôt shifting her attentions to the Spanish baritone Mariano Padilla y Ramos, a singer she would go on to marry.

It was to Artôt that Tchaikovsky dedicated his Op. 5 Romance in F Minor, a one-movement piano piece written in November 1868 and published only a couple of months later by Jürgenson. Other compositions he worked on during this period include the Concert Overture in F, dating from Tchaikovsky's time as a student at the St Petersburg Conservatory, but revised in early 1866. Indeed, this was the work that marked Tchaikovsky's debut as a professional composer in Moscow, premiered at a charity concert in March 1866, with Nikolay Rubinstein conducting. As Tchaikovsky wrote to Sasha:

'Still more flattering to my self-esteem were the ovations given me at Rubinstein's dinner after the concert. I was last to arrive, and when I entered prolonged applause broke out, at which I bowed awkwardly to all sides and blushed.'

Perhaps the most important pieces of Tchaikovsky's first years in Moscow, though, were his *Romeo and Juliet* fantasy overture and his Symphony No. 2, dubbed 'Little Russian'. While the former, premiered in 1870, is now a much-beloved orchestral piece, it was not particularly successful with Russian (or indeed European) audiences: that is, with the exception of 'The Five', especially their leader Mily Balakirev, who had instructed Tchaikovsky throughout the compositional process. The 'Little Russian', composed in 1872, has fared differently. While a rarity on today's concert programmes, in its day the Symphony was looked on favourably. Writing to Modest, Tchaikovsky described the response of guests at the first performance of his piano arrangement of the final movement at the home of composer Nikolay Rimsky-Korsakov and his wife:

'The whole assembled company was so carried away, they nearly tore me to pieces in their enthusiasm! And Madame Rimskaya-Korsakova begged me to let her arrange it for piano duet.'

Rimsky-Korsakov, Balakirev and their musical colleagues no doubt found much to praise, particularly Tchaikovsky's handling of folksong and his vivid orchestral combinations. 'The Five' allocated the highest status to folksong, regularly basing their

musical themes, rhythms, phrase lengths and even key schemes on folk culture and practice. At this stage in his life, while staying with Sasha and her husband's family on their estate in the village of Kamenko, Ukraine, Tchaikovsky was intensely occupied with folksong, some of which found its way into his symphony. (Indeed, the designation 'Little Russian' is a reference to Ukraine, known as 'Little Russia' at the time.) The finale includes a folksong called 'The Crane'; the Andantino features the song 'Spin, my Spinning Girl'; and the first movement begins with a prominent folksong played by a solo horn, 'Down by the Mother Volga'. As for Tchaikovsky's handling of the orchestra, the music illustrates a technique, favoured by 'The Five', known as 'changing background variations'. The technique is simple: a single musical theme repeats in a relatively unchanged manner, while accompanying parts vary in orchestration and decorative design.

[12] **Symphony No. 2 in C minor, Op. 17 'Little Russian' – I. Andante sostenuto**
from OehmsClassics OC762 Track 1

[13] Around this time, the early 1870s, Tchaikovsky enjoyed some success as an aspiring composer. His music was performed by leading musicians of the day, including the eminent German concert pianists Hans von Bülow and Adele aus der Ohe, and the Czech conductor Eduard Nápravník. Besides performances, publication opportunities enabled Tchaikovsky's music to reach a broader audience: his songs and piano music, available for purchase from 1867, served a burgeoning amateur market.

Despite these successes, one musical experience stands out within this period as particularly negative: Tchaikovsky's first surviving opera, *The Oprichnik* (literally, the 'guardsman'), premiered on 24th April 1874 at the Mariinsky Theatre, St Petersburg. Based on an historical drama by the Russian writer Ivan Lazhechnikov, a tragedy set in the court of Ivan the Terrible, *The Oprichnik* might well have been a success. Russian historical opera was a favourite theatrical genre of the time, particularly with 'The Five' and their much-honoured predecessor Mikhail Glinka. Moreover, Lazhechnikov's play had already been produced in Moscow at the leading dramatic theatre known as the 'Maly', first in 1867, then in 1869 and 70. At least some part of Tchaikovsky's audience,

then, would surely have been familiar with the story. Yet sharp-worded criticism ensued. While Tchaikovsky's long-time friend Laroche upheld the importance of the work 'among all the examples of Russian dramatic music', fellow musicians reacted differently. Composer Modest Musorgsky, who was a particularly iconoclastic member of 'The Five', considered Tchaikovsky's opera as an indulgence, a work designed to pander to the public with its pseudo-Italianate style. (Indeed, Italian opera was favoured in state theatres of the period.) But the most acerbic criticism came from compositional colleague Cui:

'It is a bankrupt opera: its music is bereft of ideas and weak almost throughout... Everything is grey, dull, monotonous, boring. Mr Tchaikovsky's vulgar Italianate cantilena... is false, feigned fervour, intrepidity which he will muddy into feeble and trivial candour, with which he reveals a lack of taste, excites profound regret, and from time to time even alienates.'

From an historical vantage point, we might wonder if Cui's attack was motivated at least in part by a highly critical review that Tchaikovsky had published about Cui and his music at the start of the year – only a few months before the premiere of *The Oprichnik*. Describing Cui's songs in particular, Tchaikovsky complained:

'Given their utter musical insignificance, offering nothing more than idle decantation from the empty to the emptier, they are written with the wholly comical pretence of soulfulness and passion.'

Insignificant, idle, empty: the terminology resonates with that used by Cui (dull, weak, bereft) to describe Tchaikovsky. But Tchaikovsky's criticism seems to have been part of a more thorough-going attack on the realist musical aesthetic endorsed by 'The Five': namely, their belief that music, particularly vocal music, should aim for the highest degree of verisimilitude. According to Tchaikovsky, the average listener preferred something quite different:

'not that narrowly construed truth by which a real apple is better than a drawn one, but rather a lofty artistic truth which springs from the secret depths of humankind's creative power.'

This 'creative power' and 'artistic truth' seems nowhere more vividly illustrated than in what one recent commentator describes as 'an unexpectedly gorgeous arioso' towards the end of Act One of Tchaikovsky's opera. The soaring and lyrical number is sung by the character Natalya, daughter of the important Prince Zhemchuzhiy. After we learn of her lover's plot to infiltrate the Oprichniks and seek revenge on the Prince for evicting him and his mother, Natalya reflects on her sorrow and loneliness:

[14] **The Oprichnik – Act I: Pochudilis' mne budito golosa i shum shagov**

('I thought I heard some voices') (Sung in Russian)

from Dynamic CDS430 Disc 1 Track 10

- [15] Towards the end of 1874, the same year in which *The Oprichnik* premiered, Tchaikovsky began to work on what would become one of his most popular works – popular with performers and with audiences. This was his Piano Concerto No. 1 in B flat Minor. (He would write three piano concertos, the second, in G Major, five years later, the third, in E flat Major, two years after that.) Criticism, however, was never far from musicians' lips. Various described as: 'a first pancake which turned out lumpy'; 'eminently second tier'; and 'hardly destined to become a classic', the Piano Concerto provoked the most extraordinary response from Nikolay Rubinstein, Tchaikovsky's good friend, his supportive boss at the Moscow Conservatory, and the intended performer of the premiere. After the composer played through the score for Rubinstein on 24th December, there followed an 'awkward', in fact 'ridiculous' silence. As Tchaikovsky later recalled:

'At that point words gushed from Nikolay Grigoriev, calm at first, then shifting ever more into the tone of Zeus the Thunderer. It turned out that my concerto was altogether unsuitable, that to play it was impossible, that passages were so trite, awkward and clumsy they could not be corrected, that as a composition it was bad, vulgar, that I had stolen this from that place, and this from another, that there were

only two or three pages that could stay, while the rest had either to be thrown out or completely rewritten.'

In retrospect we might thank Tchaikovsky for rebelling against Rubinstein and largely ignoring his criticism. Re-dedicating the work to Hans von Bülow, the Piano Concerto premiered in Boston on 25th October 1875, having been completed in February of that year. Von Bülow, unlike others, was complimentary. The work, he described, was 'so noble', 'so strong', 'so interesting in details': in short, 'a real pearl' that deserves 'the recognition of all pianists'. Perhaps von Bülow sensed what later scholars and critics seemed instinctively to have grasped: that, in the context of mid- to late-nineteenth-century piano concertos, this one had something new and different about it. There was its fantasia-like formal design; its rhapsodic style; the expressivity of the orchestra; and the more involved musical dialogue between orchestra and soloist. This is not to mention that glorious, grandiose, resplendent, impassioned and majestic introductory theme – a theme that, strangely enough, never recurs throughout the work.

[16] **Piano Concerto No. 1 in B flat minor, Op. 23 – I. Allegro non troppo e molto maestoso**

from Naxos 8.550819 Track 1

[17] The mid-1870s witnessed the further development of Tchaikovsky's career, and his increasing popularity with listeners. His music received considerable exposure, thanks not only to public concerts and publications, but to the role of colleagues in promoting his work, including Rubinstein – that is, after his anger over the Piano Concerto had subsided. Tchaikovsky started work on a number of new dramatic musical projects, including: the ballet *Swan Lake* (mentioned at the outset of this history); the comic opera *Vakula*, a submission to an opera competition sponsored by the Russian Musical Society; and the *Snow Maiden*, incidental music for a play by the leading Russian dramatist Aleksandr Ostrovsky.

The next period of Tchaikovsky's life can be described with reference to the composer's involvement with two very different women. One was Nadezhda von Meck,

rich and recently widowed (her husband had been one of Russia's first railroad magnates). An ardent enthusiast for Tchaikovsky's music, von Meck started to send the composer a regular and generous allowance – generous enough to allow him to resign from his teaching position at the Conservatory and concentrate only on composition, and to unburden himself of the financial difficulties he had encountered during his first decade in Moscow. Tchaikovsky's relationship with von Meck was in a sense impersonal: throughout their 14-year correspondence, they never met. But that correspondence reveals, at least at the outset, a close and productive relationship between the two, one that, according to a recent historian, 'flowered into one of the great epistolary exchanges in Western music'. As Tchaikovsky described, his benefactress was not only his 'best friend', but his 'soulmate'.

The same could not be said of the other woman who came into Tchaikovsky's orbit during this time: Antonina Ivanova Milyukova, who claimed to be a former student of the composer at the Conservatory in Moscow. Tchaikovsky's relationship with Milyukova, unlike that with von Meck, was frantic and fleeting. After a short period of correspondence, the two met in person, were engaged three days later, and then married on 18th July 1877 in the Church of St George in Moscow. Yet after only two months, the couple separated (though they never divorced). Speculation abounds as to the whys and wherefores of the relationship. Some historians describe a marriage of convenience, Tchaikovsky supposedly seeking to distract gossips from his homosexual relations. Others argue that Tchaikovsky entered into the marriage to placate Milyukova, who is thought to have threatened to kill herself if the composer did not agree to their union. Whatever the case, the two parted company after nine weeks' of marital life, Milyukova (apparently) vowing to stay silent about her husband's sexual proclivities.

But if the marriage itself was short-lived, the personal crisis it brought on seems to have endured for some time. Indeed, scholars have long described how Tchaikovsky's marriage made a lasting imprint on his compositional output. Musical examples often invoked in this context include Tchaikovsky's Violin Concerto and his opera *Eugene Onegin*, a story of a man who spurns the love of a woman who declares her affection in a letter. Another example is his Symphony No. 4 in F Minor, often nicknamed 'Fate'.

Premiered on 22nd February 1878 with Rubinstein on the rostrum, the symphony conjures some of the anguish and hopelessness supposedly felt by Tchaikovsky at the time. Indeed, the composer himself declared as much. In a letter to von Meck, to whom he dedicated the work, Tchaikovsky provided an illustrative musical programme: that is, a running commentary on the moods and meanings he intended to evoke. The ‘he’ is important, for the symphony, in line with Romantic-era ideology, represented the composer’s individual subjective experience. The second movement, for example, aimed to induce ‘the melancholy feeling that overcomes someone sitting at home in the evening, thinking nostalgically of happier times’. The first movement was morose, as Tchaikovsky implied:

‘the whole of life is merely a constant alternation of grim reality with illusory dreams of happiness. No haven exists – drift upon that sea until it engulfs and submerges you in its depths.’

The sense of defeat and depression described here in words is captured by the composer’s opening musical motif: a fanfare figure in the brass – in Tchaikovsky’s words, ‘a fateful force that... can never be overcome, merely endured, hopelessly.’

[18] **Symphony No. 4 in F minor, Op. 36 – I. Andante sostenuto**

from Naxos 8.555714 Track 2

[19] In the years that followed his ill-fated marriage, Tchaikovsky became reclusive, withdrawing from the professional musical world of Moscow and travelling around Europe. Thanks to the generosity of von Meck he was now able to choose how and where he would live, with whom he would associate, and on which musical projects he would focus his attention. It seems, on reflection, that Tchaikovsky chose to pursue different compositional directions, almost simultaneously. One such direction mapped onto his own newly nomadic existence: his Orchestral Suites Nos. 1, 2 and 3, composed between 1878 and 1884, depart from tradition, eschewing conventional musical forms in favour of freer and more expansive ones – what one recent commentator calls ‘unrestricted musical fantasy’. Another direction culminated in the grandeur, bombast and

sheer noise of what is arguably Tchaikovsky's most iconic work, the 1812 Overture, composed in 1880 to commemorate the events of the year when the Russian army forced the invading troops of Napoleon to retreat from Moscow.

[20] **1812 Overture, Op. 49**

from Naxos 8.555923 Track 5

[21] In the mid-1880s, Tchaikovsky decided to return to the Moscow region and settle down: on 17th February 1885 he rented a house in Maydanova, in the district of Klin, a residence he would occupy for the remainder of his life. He also got a job, most likely for financial reasons: von Meck's fortune had suffered a setback and the composer had become all too aware of the fragility of his situation – his wholesale dependency on his patroness. Despite initially turning down the invitation, he took on the role of Director of the Moscow branch of the Russian Musical Society, a role previously occupied by Nikolay Rubinstein who had recently passed away – an event that caused the composer considerable anguish. In his new role in the Russian Musical Society, the composer attracted a roster of international musical celebrities to the city, including Johannes Brahms, Antonin Dvorak and the French opera composer Jules Massenet. After some lessons with Hippolyte Altani of the Moscow Opera, Tchaikovsky also started to conduct, mainly his own music, but also that of Mozart, Beethoven, Charles Gounod and Alexander Borodin. He enjoyed conducting tours, travelling to the United States, and multiple opportunities to engage new listeners, new publishing outlets and new professional and amateur musicians. No doubt as a result of this increasing international exposure, Tchaikovsky garnered considerable recognition and commendation back home. For example, the tsar Alexander III awarded the composer a lifetime pension, showing Tchaikovsky special attention and supporting the performance of his work – especially the production of his operas. The tsar expected a new work every one or two years, an expectation that, as one recent historian notes, 'became a rhythm of Tchaikovsky's life'.

The composer worked on a range of musical genres at this time, from ceremonial pieces and songs to operas and large-scale orchestral works, including his Symphony No. 5. He also contributed a fourth Orchestral Suite, known as 'Mozartiana'. Composed in 1887 during a stay in the spa town of Borzhom, the suite was designed to celebrate the

centenary of Mozart's *Don Giovanni*, a work much-beloved by Tchaikovsky from childhood (as mentioned earlier). 'Composed', though, is not quite the right term in this context. For the suite was rather a compilation of music by and based on Mozart: four piano pieces selected and arranged for orchestra by Tchaikovsky. One of these movements, in fact, was an arrangement of an arrangement: Tchaikovsky's orchestration of Franz Liszt's piano transcription of Mozart's *Ave Verum Corpus*, a motet in D Major written by the Austrian composer in 1791 – the final year of his life:

[22] **Suite No. 4 in G major, Op. 61 'Mozartiana' – III. Preghiera**

from Naxos 8.550728 Track 7

[23] In the final years of Tchaikovsky's life, his compositional pace seemed to increase: as for the principal works of this period, Tchaikovsky's Symphony No. 6 was written in only 24 days, his opera *Queen of Spades* in 43 days, and his ballet *Sleeping Beauty* in 40. The last, premiered on 15th January 1890 at the Mariinsky Theatre in St Petersburg, is often described as the composer's greatest work, not to mention the greatest achievement in Russian theatrical ballet of the nineteenth century. In *Sleeping Beauty*, Tchaikovsky's compositional process was not only speedy; his music was tightly stitched to the dancing and the drama. The work itself was marked by a close collaboration between Tchaikovsky and Marius Petipa, ballet-master at the Mariinsky Theatre, along with the Director of the Russian Imperial Theatres and Tchaikovsky's former mentor, Ivan Vsevolozhsky, responsible for the scenario and costume designs. Together, the three sought to bring to life a plot based on Charles Perrault's fairy-tale *La Belle au Bois Dormant*, from his 1697 collection *Histoires et Contes du Temps Passé*: in brief, a princess is cast in a spell for 100 years only to be awakened by the kiss of a handsome Prince. Particularly impressive were the grand set pieces – formal and purely decorative dance movements – that punctuated the drama. In Act One, for example, the company celebrates the occasion of Princess Aurora's 16th birthday, dancing to what is surely one of the most well-known waltzes ever composed:

[24] **The Sleeping Beauty, Op. 66 – Act I: Valse**

from Naxos 8.550490-92 Disc 1 Track 15

- [25] A second example from the ballet illustrates Tchaikovsky's characteristically atmospheric musical style. Even here, as the Prince and the Lilac Fairy exit the stage following the appearance and disappearance of a vision of the Princess, the composer writes not only a beautiful tune, but a beautifully evocative soundscape. Listen to the way in which Tchaikovsky creates a sense of timelessness and enchantment with *legato* strings (moving mainly by step), a gentle, pulsating accompaniment, a *piano* (quiet) dynamic, a slow rate of harmonic change, and entrancing cross-rhythms – melodic motion that works against the dominant triple-time metre.
- [26] **The Sleeping Beauty, Op. 66 – Act II: Panorama**
from Naxos 8.550490-92 Disc 2 Track 14
- [27] Tchaikovsky's third and final ballet, *The Nutcracker*, was premiered at the Mariinsky Theatre on 18th December 1892, almost two years after *Sleeping Beauty*. It brought together the same creative artists, as director Vsevolozsky attempted to duplicate the success of the earlier work. In addition, it comprised a similar mixture of set dance movements (visual showpieces) and dramatic narration (mimed story-telling). And it, too, was based on a fairy-tale: *Nutcracker and the Mouse King*, a story published in 1816 by the German writer E. T. A. Hoffmann, later reworked by the French author Alexandre Dumas. In the Tchaikovsky-Petipa ballet, which took inspiration from Dumas's version of the story, the drama was more action-packed, revolving around a toy nutcracker presented to a young girl Clara by her godfather. Intrigued by the gift, Clara enjoys a fantasy in which all her toys come to life and are then attacked by an army of mice. The nutcracker defeats the Mouse King, turns into a handsome Prince, and all visit the realm of Confiturembourg (The Palace of Sweets). In a final divertissement, the Sugar Plum Fairy joins the celebration as the nutcracker returns home.
- [28] **The Nutcracker, Op. 71 – Act II, Tableau 3: Coda**
from Ondine ODE1180-2D Disc 2 Track 13

[29] Although the Tsar, present at the final dress rehearsal, was complimentary towards Tchaikovsky and enthusiastic about *The Nutcracker*, it appears that the general public was less convinced. Critical voices complained about the dancers (particularly the children), the choreography (confusing and amateurish) and the plot (contrived, especially the dramatic shifts in and out of the fantasy kingdom). While Tchaikovsky's music was generally praised, the composer himself looked on the work with dissatisfaction, comparing it unfavourably with *Sleeping Beauty*. Recent critics have tended to echo Tchaikovsky's feeling, lamenting what one calls the ballet's 'numbing, written-by-numbers populism', its artificial dramatic structure and all-too-obvious musical meaning.

It is somewhat ironic, then, that Tchaikovsky's final work, his Sixth Symphony, has inspired such a strongly contrasting reception. Premiered in St Petersburg on 28th October 1893 (only nine days before the composer's death at the age of 53), the symphony has been described in terms quite unlike those bandied around by critics of *The Nutcracker* (trivial, artificial, all-too-obvious, amateurish). Tchaikovsky's Symphony No. 6, instead, has been held up as an example of the deeply expressive and enigmatic: music that is personal, confessional and, as a result, inscrutable. Tchaikovsky himself said as much, acknowledging the inspiration of a programme or dramatic narrative, but insisting that it remain a mystery to listeners. Does the title offer clues? While, initially, the symphony was known simply as Tchaikovsky's 'Sixth Symphony in B Minor', three weeks after the premiere it was advertised as the 'Pathétique', a term that signals 'impassioned suffering'. As a result, ever since its first posthumous performance, the symphony's meaning and significance has been skewed by the subtitle, itself a reaction to Tchaikovsky's fairly sudden death. One group of critics and biographers has argued that Tchaikovsky composed the work in the grip of some deadly disease, overcome by pain and discomfort. Another group has insisted that, knowing he was going to die, the composer crafted a kind of musical suicide note, a last will and testament for those left behind to decipher. Even the nature of the composer's death has been debated. According to Modest, the facts are simple: his elder brother drank unboiled water and died of cholera. But another source suggests something much more convoluted and potentially concerning: A member of the nobility had threatened to complain to the Tsar

about an alleged homosexual relationship between his son and the composer. Wanting to avoid a public scandal, a court-of-honour comprising Tchaikovsky's old school-friends condemned him to death, forcing him to take his own life. Cholera was merely the cover-story.

Whatever the case, the Sixth Symphony makes for an apt conclusion to Tchaikovsky's life and, from the vantage point of the present-day, to his life history. The work embodies the nexus of conflicting perspectives and ideas that have characterized – for better or worse – the composer's career, his professional and personal relations. The point bears repeating: it is Tchaikovsky's music that provides the most accurate – the most convincing, most conclusive, most compelling – evidence of the struggles and contradictions about which we have learned in this history; it is his music that encapsulates and epitomizes his life. And the Sixth Symphony, it is generally argued, does a perfect job of this. Why not take a listen. For Tchaikovsky's score contrasts the highs, the triumphs and the dance-like charms of the symphony as it was known throughout much of the nineteenth century with what one recent commentator calls 'an inevitable descent to an exhausted physical and emotional demise', a musical collapse that is 'obvious to anyone who has heard it'.

[30] **Symphony No. 6 in B minor, Op. 74 'Pathétique' – IV. Finale: Adagio lamentoso**
from Naxos 8.550782 Track 4