

Piotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky (1840-1893)

Romeo and Juliet Fantasy Overture

The exact level of torment that Tchaikovsky suffered through his life is hard to appreciate, even with hindsight and prying research into private letters. How does one reconcile the extraordinary pattern of trauma, and feelings of angst, loneliness and unworthiness that accompanied him from childhood to his grave? His early childhood was rocked by the death of his mother from cholera, on June 25th, 1854. This event is considered by all who review his life, to be of major significance – providing him with vivid, grief stricken memories that never left him. His father, who luckily recovered after a bout with the same disease, suggested that he return to school to get his mind off things.

Tchaikovsky's latent homosexuality did not create a constant internal struggle within himself – as sometimes is the case – but rather understood that betrayal or being found out in a society that totally denied its inclusion warranted huge amounts of care and worry. Finding recourse in the engagement to the Belgian soprano Desiree Artot in 1868 was a public act of deflection – and as such failed miserably, as she married another man without warning in 1869. By all accounts Tchaikovsky claimed love for her - but his only real devotion to a woman was manifested in the platonic and enabling relationship he had with Nadezhda von Meck, his benefactor from the 1870s to 1890s.

In 1868 Tchaikovsky was already a professor at the Moscow Conservatory, where he had been led by his close relationship with his mentor Anton Rubinstein. Rubinstein favoured a western style for composition, which brought him, and his protégé Tchaikovsky into the critical eye of the *Moguchaya kuchka* or the Mighty Five. This was the group of ardently nationalistic Russian composers Cui, Rimsky-Korsakov, Borodin, Mussorgsky and Balakirev, their undoubted leader.

When one looks at critical peer relationships, as the one between Robert Schumann and Johannes Brahms, or the specific critical connection between Clara Schumann as the proof reader and major commentator on Brahms latest manuscripts, - one can feel the sense of unworthiness that great composers may have been forced to feel. This, simply because they needed a kind and supporting endorsement of their work. If this endorsement came in the way of harsh criticism, it usually threw the composer into spirals of unworthiness and depression causing sessions of score burning and wound licking. As much as this may have occurred with Johannes Brahms and Clara Schumann, - (*so many manuscripts were lost to the critical flames*) it certainly occurred in a debilitating fashion between Tchaikovsky and Balakirev. Both publically pronounced that they valued each others relationship above all else, but the

harshest criticisms were delivered to an already compromised Tchaikovsky. Balakirev wrote to Tchaikovsky after the delivery of the piece *Fatum*, which was dedicated to him.

“Your Fatum has been performed reasonably well ... There wasn't much applause, probably because of the appalling cacophony at the end of the piece, which I don't like at all. It is not properly gestated, and seems to have been written in a very slapdash manner. The seams show, as does all your clumsy stitching. Above all, the form itself just does not work. The whole thing is completely uncoordinated.... I am writing to you with complete frankness, being fully convinced that you won't go back on your intention of dedicating Fatum to me. Your dedication is precious to me as a sign of your sympathy towards me—and I feel a great weakness for you.”

Though Tchaikovsky was very taken by writing on a Shakespearean theme it was ostensibly Balakirev that sought to tell him the manner in which he should proceed. Surprisingly, Tchaikovsky was still prone to listen, agonize, amend, worry and relent – while it seems that Balakirev enjoyed ‘skewering’ Tchaikovsky, playing on his insecurities and offering his own works as a template.

The *Romeo and Juliet Fantasy Overture* with which we are left today has undergone several versions, the first of which was received poorly because the audience was more interested in fêting the affair that Nikolai Rubinstein the conductor had with a female student at the Conservatory. Tchaikovsky bemoaned the silent lack of appreciation at the dinner that followed the concert. The second version was the result of several sharp observations by Balakirev and resulted in the placement of the wonderful ‘love theme’ which, truth be known, was inspired by a male lover. The third and final version came almost a decade later in a reworking that was conducted by Ippolitov-Ivanov.

Nevertheless, the work is vintage Tchaikovsky. The warmth, the vigour, the passion, the structural form, the dynamic orchestration are all glowingly present. The music evokes the storyline at every stage, creating a magnificent panorama. The opening *chorale* of Friar Lawrence’s Cell, perhaps more Russian Orthodox than Tuscan Catholic, gives way to the bloody clash of swords, as if Tybalt and Mercutio were actually ‘having at it’ in the viola section. And then, yes, there is that ability to spin a melody so transporting and intoxicating that, when all fades away and the lights are out, this very melody, transporting and intoxicating, is keeping the listener awake at night with the power of a triple espresso.

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