

Piotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky (1840-1893)

Symphony No. 5 in E minor.

Andante – Allegro con anima

Andante cantabile, con alcuna licenza

Valse – Allegro Moderato

Finale – Andante maestoso – Allegro vivace

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. We are not entirely certain as to whether his own death in 1893 was succumbing to the same disease, or whether it was self inflicted.

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. One thing is certain. His music was highly praised by all after his death – until his sexuality became more widely revealed to the public. Then, demonstrating shameful arrogance and stupidity many seem to change their minds about music they had already heard – now tainted by sheer prejudice.

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 scathingly about the piece 'Fatum' – and demonstrated complete insensitivity towards an already agonizing Tchaikovsky.

It is important to note why Balakirev had a problem, and the reasons may give a clear insight into how Tchaikovsky's music *should* be performed. The innately Russian instincts of the Mighty Five were at odds with Tchaikovsky's style, since he was mentored by Rubinstein in the Germanic vein. The harmonic and melodic structure of what is written is essentially Germanic, even if Tchaikovsky is able to give it a uniquely Russian flavor. Therein lies Balakirev's problem, and it remains Balakirev's problem – not Tchaikovsky's. The best sonic expression of the great fifth symphony written in 1888 must therefore be a combination of Germanic and Russian sentiments. The triumph of the piece is demonstrated in an unabashed marriage of the two, that demonstrates an understanding of Tchaikovsky in the Austro-Germanic Tradition – and also at the same time conceding that not all waltzes are 'Wiener Walzer'.

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