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Tchaikovsky and his Violin Concerto : A Theme of Opposites

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Tchaikovsky and his Violin Concerto: A Theme

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Honors in Music

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**Pyotr Ilyitch Tchaikovsky and His Violin Concerto:
A Theme of Opposites**

A Thesis

Presented to the Department of Music History

Jordan College of Fine Arts

and

The Honors Program

of

Butler University

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for Graduation Honors

Jennifer Lynn Bougher

9 March 2000

BUTLER UNIVERSITY • JORDAN COLLEGE OF FINE ARTS

HONORS THESIS RECITAL

Jennifer Bougher, violin

Student of Larry Shapiro

assisted by

Amy Eggleston, piano

Johnson Room

Thursday, March 9, 2000 • 7:00 p.m.

PROGRAM

Lecture

"Tchaikovsky and his Violin Concerto: A Theme of Opposites"

Violin Concerto in D Major, Op. 35

Allegro moderato

Canzonetta: Andante

Finale: Allegro vivacissimo

P.I. Tchaikovsky

(1840-1893)

*This recital is presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements for
University Honors.*



**BUTLER
UNIVERSITY**

Jennifer Bougher Honors Thesis Lecture Recital 9 March 2000

*“A Theme of Opposites in Tchaikovsky” **

Introduction

As I began researching Tchaikovsky and his Violin Concerto, I noted a theme of opposites. Tchaikovsky led an antithetical and complicated life that is reflected in his music. In my lecture I want to illuminate these ambiguities and complexities in his life, his music in general, and in his Violin Concerto. I will assert that while many opposing factors presented a struggle in his life, in his music it is the reconciliation of these opposites that makes for intriguing music. At the end of the lecture I will illustrate these claims musically by performing a majority of Tchaikovsky’s Violin Concerto.

I. Life

A. Emotional/Personal

1. In Tchaikovsky’s personal traits alone there are contradictions. He has been described as: Intensely emotional, headstrong, and impetuous but also as modest, shy, conscious of careful workmanship, and “simple.”

a. ex. anecdote of youth: “Passionately kissing the map of Russia and

then..spitting on the other countries, he was reminded by his nurse that she herself was French. "Yes," he said, "I covered France with my hand."

This example illustrates his duality of heart and mind. (Mason)

2. In other personal traits, Tchaikovsky has been described as shy, awkward, self-critical, and suffering from insomnia, but at the same time as warm, friendly, attractive, sought-out, gentle, and modest.

a. Catherine Drinker Bowen writes: "Over-sensitive, over-shy, weak of will and overwhelmingly, frighteningly strong of emotion, Peter shunned the concert hall where his music was to be performed...." He was "pathologically shy", according to himself in letters to Ms. von Meck. Yet, he was not "unattractive physically, awkward in manners, or disagreeable to meet. Perversely enough, he was the very antithesis of these things: his trouble was over-attractiveness, over-amiability; his only social incapacity lay in a ludicrous inability to say no" (Bowen 14-15)

b. Alexandra Panayeva illustrates duality, conflicting opposites within the composer: She always wanted to meet him, but was not successful. At the premiere of Tchaikovsky's *Eugene Onegin* in 1879 she saw him from the box she was sharing with Anton Rubinstein, Tchaikovsky's old teacher. Rubinstein tricked Tchaikovsky into going to the box "assuring him that no one was in it." Tchaikovsky refused to speak and at first chance, "he flew headlong out of the box." About a week later

Tchaikovsky and his brothers were to dine with Panayeva, but he sat as far away as possible, “totally confused and with eyes lowered” and refused to speak directly to her. The next day however, he visited her alone. She writes, “He approached to take my hand in a free and easy manner, and we had a lively conversation. He began by thanking me for having spent such a pleasant evening the previous day. I saw before me a totally different person - cheerful, lively, a thorough man of fashion, even elegant” Yet she acknowledges that he had inner struggles between his two opposites of character: “For instance, once he for some reason invited me to dine with him and, on my agreeing, suddenly became alarmed, and began reproaching himself for inviting me.” (*Tchaikovsky Remembered*, 67)

B. Historically, there is also a theme of opposites in Tchaikovsky’s life.

1. Antonina Ivanova Milyukova, his wife

a. Tchaikovsky was married to Antonina, but he was homosexual, as is revealed in letters to his brothers.

b. She provided her own ambiguities for him in letters which were often loving then hateful.

2. Nadejda (Nadezhda) von Meck

a. As opposed to Antonina, with Nadejda Tchaikovsky had less contact, yet theirs was a relationship of much more warmth. It was business but

also love. This is a prime example of two opposite sides of Tchaikovsky: the impersonal artist versus the real, vulnerable human being.

b. Tchaikovsky and Nadejda agreed to have no personal contact.

3. Clarens, village on Lake Geneva

a. Piano Sonata (empty, fabricated) vs. Violin Concerto (Yosef Kotek-violinist friend from Berlin, stayed in Clarens with him, wrote concerto with him, sexual, emotional) Tchaikovsky loved Kotek dearly, and the time he spent with him was time spent joyously, though in the midst of great emotional turmoil surrounding his wife. (*The Crisis Years* 265)

4. Violin Concerto

a. Written in lull of emotional sadness, in midst of musical happiness.

Sexual frustration to sexual happiness, emotional whirlwind.

Was Tchaikovsky able to reconcile the opposites that existed within his life? Maybe not. However, as with most artists, life filters into art, and these ambiguities are present in his music.

II. Music

A. General

1. Inspiration vs. Mechanical Work- Tchaikovsky helps answer questions of

inspiration and work and how to reconcile the two. He illustrates and reconciles the differences between the artistic world and the ordinary business of life.

a. Passion and inspiration are reconciled with reason and mechanics in his letters: "For compositions of the second category [commissioned] sometimes you have to attune yourself. Here you very often have to overcome laziness, reluctance. Then certain things happen. Sometimes victory comes easily. Sometimes inspiration slips away, eludes you. But I consider it is the *duty* of an artist never to give way, for laziness is a very powerful human trait. For an artist there is nothing worse than to give way to this. You cannot simply wait. Inspiration is the sort of guest who does not like visiting those who are lazy. She reveals herself to those who invite her. (*The Crisis Years* 233-235).

You forget everything, you are almost insane, everything inside you trembles and writhes, you scarcely manage to set down sketches, one idea presses upon another. Sometimes in the middle of this enchanted process some jolt from without suddenly wakens you from this somnambulistic state. Somebody will ring, a servant will enter, the clock strikes and reminds you that you have to go about your business...these breaks are painful, inexpressibly painful. Sometimes inspiration flies off for a while; you have to go in search of her, sometimes in vain. Very frequently you have to resort to a completely cold, intellectual, mechanical work process. Perhaps this is why you can find moments in even the greatest masters where organic cohesion is lacking, where a seam shows, bits of the whole which are artificially stuck together. But there is no other way. If that state of the artist's soul which is called *inspiration*, and which I have just been trying to describe to you, were to continue unbroken, it would not be possible to survive a single day. The strings would snap and the instrument shatter to smithereens.

Do not believe those who try to convince you that musical creation is a cold pursuit, governed by reason... You can only be moved, touched, or shaken by that music which has poured from the depths of an artistic soul stirred by inspiration. There is no doubt that even the greatest musical geniuses sometimes worked unwarmed by inspiration. It is the kind of guest that does not always appear at the first summons. In the meantime you must always *work*.

b. Tchaikovsky's music reflects outer brilliance and also inner warmth:

"His compositions traced... a middle path between Gounod and Schumann; they had outer brilliance and inner warmth, they pleased the uninitiated and the expert, could serve as a model for fashion, yet outlive its caprices." (*Tchaikovsky Remembered* 239)

2. His music expresses both torment and love: "I will tell you that more than once I have tried lovingly to express in music the torment and, at the same time, the bliss of love... I completely disagree with you when you say that music cannot convey the all-embracing characteristics of the feeling of love. I believe quite the contrary, that music alone can do this." (*The Crisis Years* 231)

3. Tchaikovsky loved Mozart and Classical style, yet this is not at all reflected in his Romantic, Russian Style, which we'll see especially in Mvts II, III of the Violin Concerto.

a. He had within him that happy balance between 'the search for new

paths' and an instinctive attachment to the classical tradition. . . He loved Mozart passionately, loved him not in theory but in practice, and successfully advanced his cause - but in Tchaikovsky's own compositions there was no turning back, nothing archaic or in opposition to the age..”

(*Tchaikovsky Remembered* 241)

4. Melody/Harmony/Rhythm - These different elements become one in Tchaikovsky's music.

a. (*The Crisis Years* 236) - “ A melody can never appear in my head except with its harmony. Both these musical elements, together with the rhythm, can never be separated from each other, i.e. every melodic idea carries its own implicit harmony, and is unfailingly furnished with its own rhythmic structure”

5. Lush Melodies and Technical Acrobatics also combine in his music.

B. Violin Concerto

1. Movement I - specific look at how these opposites and ambiguities exist in the Violin Concerto

a. Structurally simple, but rich lyrics and “brilliant passage work” - “Such an alliance of *simple melody and complex pyrotechnics* was, of course, the recipe for countless virtuoso concerti of the nineteenth century, but in none of these is the *melody on a higher level, or the display element more*

judiciously employed or more naturally integrated into the flow of lyrical ideas - nor is the structural bracing of musical expanses so secure" (*The Crisis Years* 264 italics mine) ->(not like his life, where there is not an alliance, but a struggle) --momentarily I will play the exposition of the first movement where you will hear this alliance of lyricism and technicality. I believe they are each recognizable enough that I need not point out the lyrical passages, though you will notice that both melody and technicalities are intertwined. Today I am playing only the exposition of the first movement. It is a structurally simple movement, and the entire second half after the cadenza is a reiteration of the exposition. Thus, the exposition reveals all the significant points.

b. Exposition - fertile, free, melodic flow w/ recurrent features (an example of inspiration combined with careful work) -> succession of different melodic ideas from which a longer musical stretch is created (play examples)

"Delightful Ambiguity" - where does one theme end and the next begin (play examples) sm. example of reconciled differences. (*The Crisis Years* 264-5)

Play I Exposition

C. Leopold Auer

1. Concerto dedicated to Auer (not Kotek for fear of rumors) because of his prestige - March 22, 1879 scheduled premier in St. Petersburg. Although they had a “sincere friendship” Auer refused to play it, deeming it too awkward and unplayable. “Auer himself, writing thirty years after Tchaikovsky’s death, by which time he had played the concerto many times, excused himself on the grounds that he wished to make revisions to the solo part before attempting it publicly....” (*The Crisis Years* 262). Two years later Tchaikovsky transferred the dedication to Adolf Brodsky who premiered it in Vienna on 4 Dec 1881 (to bad reviews).
2. The irony - “At a memorial concert given within a fortnight of Tchaikovsky’s death, the program included...the Violin Concerto - played by Leopold Auer! After this, Auer took up the “offensive” concerto, not only decided that it was not unplayable, but proceeded to *add technical difficulties of his own to the first movement and to make cuts in the Finale.*” (play Auer change) His edition is often played today - the Concerto today lives amid contradictions!

B. (cont) Violin Concerto - Movements II, III

1. Russian!

- a. The opposites combined here are Patriotism and love/art.

- b. In III, we see pure Russian life combined with technical complications
- c. There is contrast between the two movements. The second is inwardly yearning, full of “muted, ripe, soulful Slavic imagery” versus the third movement: vividly pictorial, openly *Russian*. Yet for all the opposites within, the two are complementary, linked (*The Crisis Years* 268)

Conclusion

There were a great deal of opposites, ambiguities, and complexities present in Tchaikovsky’s life. These worked their way into his music as well. Though maybe not in his life, in music Tchaikovsky is able to reconcile the ambiguities and paradoxes and opposites. In fact, it is their merging that makes something beautiful.

Play II, III

* This outline is intended to be a supplement to the video-recorded presentation, not as a separate work.

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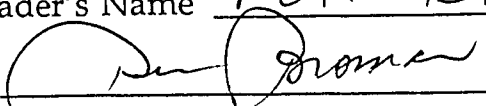
Our students spend a great many hours, energy and thought on their Honors Thesis projects, and your written comments will aid them not only in bringing their project to a successful close but also in recognizing and celebrating their achievement. Please use the space provided below to offer your overall evaluation of the thesis, commenting on the following areas: content and organization, reasoning, research and methodology, creativity, writing quality, performance quality. Feel free to use additional sheets. When you have completed your evaluation of the thesis, please return both the form and the thesis to the Honors Office (JH 133). Thank you very much.

Pyotr Ilyitch Tchaikovsky and His Violin Concerto: A Theme of Opposites by Jennifer Lynn Bougher opens an interesting window of interpretation for a performer of this work: that the composer's antithetical and complicated life can somehow be mapped onto the music. This claim was well presented at the honors thesis recital on March 9, 2000, both verbally and musically. It was a fine performance of this highly difficult work.

The final version of the thesis presents a few problems (however solvable with some revision work); it consists more of an outline of the lecture recital than a self-contained work of prose. At it stands, the text cannot be read and understood by someone who did not attend the recital.

I propose the following:

- ✓ The addition of an introductory paragraph in which the ideas presented are outlined.
- ✓ The removal of outlines in point form (such as the ones on pp. 1, 3, 8-9), to be replaced by a narrative written in complete sentences.
- ✓ A conclusion that summarizes the findings.

Faculty Reader's Name PER BROMAN Dept. Music
Signature  Date 4/10/2000 Rev. 3/99