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Jacob R. Leonowitz
Duquesne University

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Reevaluating Perceptions of Tchaikovsky's *Pathétique* Symphony

By Jacob Leonowitz

B.S. Music Education

Duquesne University, Class of 2016

Abstract

Peter Ilyich Tchaikovsky's *Symphony No. 6 in B minor* ("*Pathétique*") was welcomed only lukewarmly at its 1893 premiere. Among other things, audiences were confused by Tchaikovsky's atypical choice of a slow and lamenting final movement to conclude the symphony. The mysterious circumstances surrounding Tchaikovsky's death only days after the *Pathétique*'s premiere spawned rumors that the composer had committed suicide after years of struggling with his homosexuality. The public consequently embraced the work with new understanding, perceiving it as a "musical suicide note." Primary sources, however, including the composer's brother and Xeniya Davydov, provided accounts relating to the end of Tchaikovsky's life which counter suicide rumors. Nonetheless, the notion of the *Pathétique* as a funereal, autobiographical melodrama has survived. The musicologist Timothy Jackson argues that the understanding of the work as a "musical suicide note," and/or tragic narrative about forbidden love influenced later composers such as Rachmaninoff, Mahler, Berg, and Britten, among others. Jackson draws formal, harmonic, and other parallels between the *Pathétique* and the works of these composers to show how they used compositional techniques from the *Pathétique* to further their own musical narratives about death, love, and unrequited desires. I argue that these later works intensified an irresistible tendency to perceive the *Pathétique* as a tragic autobiography, in spite of primary source material indicating Tchaikovsky's optimism at the time. The progression of music history since the time of the *Pathétique*'s premiere has made it impossible for us to perceive the work (especially its enigmatic final movement) otherwise

Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky's swan song, *Symphony No. 6, "Pathétique,"* (1893) is a work beloved for its beauty and majesty, but bewildering in terms of form and intent. Tchaikovsky's atypical choice of a slow and lamenting finale as opposed to the usual bombastic and triumphant one fueled a great deal of confusion and speculation from the *Pathétique's* earliest audiences. People were led to perceive the work as a "musical suicide note" relating to the composer's homosexuality. Although such notions turned out to have tenuous factual basis, people continue to perceive the work as such today because later artists have situated that interpretation as a tradition in artistic culture.

Tchaikovsky's homosexuality in a time and place not accepting of such tendencies caused him a great deal of stress. Exacerbating these issues were the women who were obsessed with Tchaikovsky. One such woman was his pen-pal and patron, Nadezhda von Meck. Ultimately, his relationship with von Meck turned out to be mutually beneficial, as she funded his activities in exchange for his writing her letters, but the two never met (Poznansky, 1993). A somewhat less productive relationship was that which he had with his wife. Antonina Milyukova was a former student of Tchaikovsky's who confessed a disturbing love for him through letters. She once ventured so far as to write, "I cannot live without you, and so maybe shall kill myself" (Brown, 1983, p. 140). Tchaikovsky was hesitant, but felt that fate drew him to Milyukova and so married her (Brown, 1983). The union, as to be expected due to his true relationship preferences, dissolved quickly. That idea of fate, however, pervaded his subsequent *Fourth* (1878) and *Fifth* (1888) *Symphonies* (Jackson, 1995). *Symphony No. 6* broke this trend and perplexed the public.

The *Pathétique* premiered on October 16th, 1893, and was received lukewarmly at best. The audience and the musicians were described as ambivalent toward the work. Tchaikovsky, himself, stated that "it is not that [the symphony] wasn't liked, but it has caused some bewilderment" (Poznansky, 1996, p. 64). Arguably the most confusing aspect of the symphony is that the penultimate movement is the bombastic one, as if it were the finale. The actual finale is slow and lamenting, terminating the work with a funerary air. Music critic and friend of Tchaikovsky's, Herman Laroche, was able to look past these

formal oddities and give a diplomatic review of the symphony, stating that “if [the audience] did not get to the core of Tchaikovsky’s *Sixth Symphony* today, then tomorrow or the day after tomorrow they will begin to appreciate it and, in the end, come to love it” (Poznansky, 1996, p. 58). His viewpoint would turn out to be eerily prophetic.

Contemporary audiences were naturally puzzled by the slow finale of the work and posed the question as to why Tchaikovsky would make such a strange musical decision. Nine days later, they got what they interpreted as an answer. Tchaikovsky died of cholera on October 25th, 1893, having carelessly consumed infected water. Many interpreted his death as a suicide, the culmination of struggles with his sexuality. Fueled by the details and rumors surrounding his death, speculators came to regard his final symphony as a “musical suicide note” of homosexual disclosure and martyrdom. For one thing, the symphony was dedicated to Tchaikovsky’s nephew, Vladimir “Bob” Davydov, whom he greatly admired in an almost incestuous fashion (Jackson, 1999). Additionally, speculation arose from Tchaikovsky’s remark that there was a program, or explicit narrative, behind the work which he did not wish to reveal (Poznansky, 1996). People were looking to put a narrative behind the music, and subsequently a face to that narrative. As the narrative, they chose the tragic story of a musical protagonist whose demise comes about as a result of tremendous emotional/sexual struggles and misunderstandings. As the face, they chose Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky.

Research into the primary sources of the time, however, indicates that suicide claims are unfounded. Compiled by biographer Alexander Poznansky, the majority of *Tchaikovsky’s Last Days* presents a survey of the primary accounts of the last month in Tchaikovsky’s life. As evidenced by *Tchaikovsky’s Last Days*, one person who gave rise to suicide theories was another of Tchaikovsky’s nephews, Yury Davydov. Davydov described an incident that occurred in October of 1893 when Tchaikovsky was at a restaurant with friends and flippantly consumed unclean water despite the protests of those around him: “Laughing, Pyotr Ilyich jumped up and went to meet the waiter, and Modest rushed after him. But Pyotr Ilyich forestalled him and, pushing his brother aside with his elbow, succeeded in

drinking in one gulp the fateful glass” (Poznansky, 1996, p. 75). The question then becomes whether this was the careless act of a happy-go-lucky composer, or a strange suicide attempt which would ultimately prove successful. Other sources, however, including Yury Yuryev, The Stock–Exchange Register, The Petersburg Gazette, Nikolay Figner and even Nikolay Tchaikovsky, the composer’s elder brother, would argue that neither interpretation of the incident is true, because the incident never happened. In their accounts, they describe Tchaikovsky going to the restaurant with friends but say nothing to corroborate Davydov’s dramatic story of Tchaikovsky infecting himself with a fateful glass of water (Poznansky, 1996). In addition, Yury Davydov’s daughter, Xeniya Davydov, later admitted that her father had fabricated the account in order to dispel rumors of suicide:

[Xeniya] suggested that her father was perturbed by the continuous suicide rumours intimately linked to the fact of the composer’s homosexuality. Since under the Soviets the latter could not even be mentioned in print, he thought it expedient to include himself among the diners at Leiner’s restaurant so that he could claim to have witnessed precisely the very moment of Tchaikovsky infecting himself with cholera by drinking the fateful glass of the allegedly contaminated water, and thus to refute the suicide theory for good. (Poznansky, 1996, p. 77-78)

In other words, according to his daughter, Davydov invented this story to quiet preexisting rumors of suicide relating to the composer’s sexuality. His fabrication, however, backfired, as the public interpreted the purported incident, itself, as an act of suicide.

It is also important to note that Tchaikovsky had actually reached a stable point in his life with regard to his personal issues by 1893. Nobody who was in contact with Tchaikovsky immediately previous to the alleged incident at the restaurant noticed anything emotionally wrought about his disposition. Furthermore, according to musicologist Richard Taruskin, Tchaikovsky had made statements to his brother, Modest Tchaikovsky, earlier that very night that he planned to live yet a long time:

‘There is plenty of time before we need reckon with this horror [of death]; it will not come to snatch us off just yet!’ [Tchaikovsky] remarked to Modest. Then he added, ‘I feel I shall live a long time.’ (Taruskin, 2000, p. 53)

He was also very proud of his *Symphony No. 6*, standing by it even when the musicians and audiences at the premiere were ambivalent. He maintained optimism and voiced pride in the work in spite of

circumstances which could have put him in a state of despair (Brown, 1991). Modest Tchaikovsky, remarked that he seemed “to have understood perfectly well what a challenge [the work] posed for all his listeners, sensing that their verdict was perhaps not final” (Brown, 1991, p. 444). This evidence simply does not paint a picture of a suicidal man.

In spite of fact-based challenges, perceptions of the work as a musical suicide note still persist to this day. One could argue that this is because those perceptions influenced later works. Timothy Jackson explores this idea in Chapter Seven of *Tchaikovsky, Symphony No. 6 (“Pathétique”)*. Probably most of all, the work seems to have become a paradigm for the use of a slow and lamenting finale as opposed to a bombastic and triumphant one. Rachmaninoff displays Tchaikovsky’s influence, both in terms of narrative and tonality, in a number of his works (Jackson, 1999). In particular, Rachmaninoff explores the idea of forbidden interracial love – in accordance with the idea that the *Pathétique* explores forbidden homosexual love – culminating in a slow finale with his *First Symphony* (1895) (Jackson, 1999). Gustav Mahler’s *Ninth* (1909) and *Tenth* (1910) *Symphonies*, in particular, both feature slow and lamenting finales. Some may interpret these finales as part of autobiographical musical narratives, just as many interpret the *Pathétique*’s finale. In Mahler’s case, this autobiography is about the religious tension between he and his wife – he was a Jew and she was a Gentile (Jackson, 1999). Similarly, Alban Berg employs a slow finale in his *Lyric Suite* (1926), which explores his own forbidden interracial passion (Jackson, 1999). Alfred Schnittke employs similarly collapsing finales in his *Third* (1981), *Fourth* (1983), *Fifth* (1988), and *Eighth* (1994) *Symphonies*, and the composer himself has remarked on the loss of hope and faith which the *Pathétique*’s finale seems to espouse (Jackson, 1999). Additionally, Dmitri Shostakovich admits to quoting the work in his lamenting *Eighth String Quartet* (1960) and seems to play off of the *Pathétique*’s finale in the penultimate movement of his *Symphony No. 9* (1945) (Jackson, 1999). These works draw upon somber perceptions of the *Pathétique*’s slow finale in such a way that makes it difficult for today’s music lovers and critics to view the finale any other way.

Examining what Jackson calls the “‘*Tristan = Pathétique*’ chord” reveals more parallels between the *Pathétique* and later works (Jackson, 1999, p. 57). The *Tristan* chord is a harmony from Wagner’s opera, *Tristan und Isolde*, meant to portray unquenchable, unrequited desire, and the resultant anguish (Jackson, 1999). The *Tristan* chord is the first chord heard in the opera, creating an immediate air of pain and longing with its dissonance. The phrase ultimately resolves to a place of *somewhat* greater stability, but even the final chord is dissonant and the tension remains unresolved. There is a pull toward resolution which is never satisfied, portraying unsatisfied longings. Tchaikovsky uses a similar sonority at the beginning of the *Pathétique*’s finale. The two chords in question are not exactly identical, but differences are slight and the dissonant nature of the harmony remains intact (Jackson, 1999). In the *Pathétique*, the musical phrase likewise seeks resolution of the dissonance in the chord, but never really finds tonal stability. Whether Tchaikovsky meant to use this kind of sonority in the same way that Wagner did – to portray unrequited desire – is up for debate. However, two later composers use similar compositional techniques in their operas, seemingly interpreting Tchaikovsky as such. In Alban Berg’s *Lulu*, premiered incomplete in 1937 and completed in 1979, the deformed harmony references unfulfilled desire relating to lesbianism, drawing upon Berg’s own life experiences with a lesbian sister whom he felt suffered as a result of her sexuality (Jackson, 1999). In *Death and Venice* (1973), the harmony appears in reference to unsatisfied yearnings of a homosexual nature, undoubtedly drawing upon Britten’s own life as a gay man (Jackson, 1999). The similarities between the *Tristan* chord and the initial chord in the *Pathétique*’s finale, and similar harmonies in later works, show that the *Pathétique* as an autobiographical expression of painful longing is an influential interpretation which can never be discarded.

Even today, the *Pathétique* continues to resonate in the same way as it did in 1893. Contemporary works continue to be influenced by perceptions of the *Pathétique* as a “musical suicide note” related to homosexuality. Ken Russell’s biopic on Tchaikovsky, *The Music Lovers*, depicts, among other things, Tchaikovsky’s turbulent marriage. One scene involves an awkward sexual encounter between Tchaikovsky and his wife where she tries to initiate sexual involvement, but he cannot bring

himself to indulge her. The turbulent first movement of the *Pathétique* plays in the background as this happens (Russell, 1970). Similarly, the funereal finale of the work plays as Tchaikovsky dies at the end of the film (Russell, 1970). Thus, the association between the *Pathétique* and themes of homosexuality and death continues to persist in modern media such as this film.

Maurice by E.M. Forster is another example. Forster was an English novelist known for exploring themes of homosexuality. He employs the *Pathétique* as a veiled reference to homosexuality throughout his novel, *Maurice*. *Maurice* explores the same-sex love and relationships of the titular character, Maurice Hall, a University student living in early 20th century England. Symbolism involving Tchaikovsky's *Symphony No. 6* plays a large part in the development of Maurice's relationships and clearly represents homosexuality. The characters interact with the symphony in such a way where it serves as a disclosure of sexuality and self-discovery for them (Keeling, 2003). Ultimately, however, this form of disclosure does not serve its purpose. One character, Clive, knows that Tchaikovsky was homosexual, but Maurice does not. Clive eventually turns to the *Pathétique*'s final movement in order to *disclose* his tragic disappointment at how he and Maurice have failed to come together (Keeling, 2003). Eventually, Maurice contemplates marriage, but when he learns that Tchaikovsky was a homosexual, he realizes that at which Clive was hinting (Keeling, 2003). Essentially, the characters in the novel use the *Pathétique* as a tool to communicate desires which cannot be stated any more clearly because of the social climate around them. In *Maurice*, Tchaikovsky's symphony and its alleged connection to the composer's sexuality help the characters to understand one another, just as Tchaikovsky's contemporary audiences thought that the symphony was helping them to understand Tchaikovsky's untimely demise and unsatisfying personal life.

It is not this study's intention to discount theories of the *Pathétique* as a "musical suicide note" relating to Tchaikovsky's sexuality. It is, in part, this study's intention to slightly discredit those theories as not supported by primary sources. It is not that such theories are most definitely not true, it is just that there is not enough evidence to prove that they are. It could be that Tchaikovsky *was* going for a musical

narrative about a musical protagonist and his/her ultimate demise, but that his symphony was not actually an autobiography. It could even be that Tchaikovsky was capitalizing on themes from his own life, but only using the symphony to cast out the demons of his previous personal issues and move forward, not creating an autobiographical narrative about anguish and hint at eventual demise. Contemporary audiences, however, came to the conclusion that he had done just that in their search for narrative meaning behind the music. Musical works and other artistic expressions remain stuck on this factually-challenged interpretation because if one cannot understand the *Pathétique* as a “musical suicide note” of self-disclosure and connect that narrative to Tchaikovsky’s identity, then one cannot understand the narratives behind many later works. Works that came after the *Pathétique* intensified an irresistible tendency to perceive Tchaikovsky’s symphony as a tragic narrative and attach Tchaikovsky’s very face to that narrative. The progression of music history since 1893 has engraved that interpretation as a tradition that continues to be referenced in musical culture and in the other arts, thereby making it almost impossible for the work to be perceived otherwise.

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