Life Of Peter Tchaikovsky Essay, Research Paper

The Life of Peter Tchaikovsky

Peter Ilyich Tchaikovsky, also spelled Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky, was born in Votkinsk, in the city of Vyatka, Russia, May 7, 1840. Second in a family of five sons and one daughter, to whom he was extremely devoted. Once in his early teens when he was in school at St. Petersburg and his mother started to drive to another city, he had to be held back while she got into the carriage, and the moment he was free ran and tried to hold the wheels.

There is an anecdote of Tchaikovsky’s earliest years that gives us a clue to the paradox of his personality. Passionately kissing the map of Russia and then, one regrets to state, spitting on the other countries, he was reminded by his nurse that she herself was French. “Yes,” he said, accepting her criticism with perfect sweetness and affectionate docility, “I covered France with my hand.” The child is father of the man; here we have already Tchaikovsky’s strange two-sidedness: on one hand his intense emotionality in all personal matters, his headstrong impetuosity, leaping first and looking afterwards; on the other his candor and modesty, his intelligent acceptance of criticism, even his carefulness and good workmanship-he had covered France with his hand”! If he had only been able to reconcile that lifelong feud between his over-personal heart and his magnanimous mind, he would have been saved endless suffering. But he was not: in his music his self-criticism, as on of his best biographers, Edwin Evans, has remarked, “came after and not during composition”-he destroyed score after score. And in daily life he never learned to apply the advice of a wit tot he victim of a temperament like his: “less remorse and more reform.”

As a youth he reluctantly studied law, as much bore by it as Schumann had been, and even became a petty clerk in the Ministry of Justice. But in his early twenties he rebelled, and against his family’s wishes had the courage to throw himself into the study of music at the St. Petersburg Conservatory. He was a ready improviser, playing well for dancing and had a naturally rich sense of harmony, but was so little schooled as to be astonished when a cousin told him it was possible to modulate form any key to another. He went frequently to the Italian operas which at that time almost monopolized the Russian stage, and laid the foundation of his lifelong love for Mozart; but he had no acquaintance with Schumann, and at 21 did not even know how many symphonies Beethoven had composed. He was an ardent worker nevertheless, and once when Anton Rubinstein, his teacher of composition, asked for variations, he sat up all night and brought in two hundred. Is not that already the very picture of a facility almost fatal?–a facility which in even so fine a work as the Trio transforms an unoffending Russian folk tune into a waltz, a mazurka, and even a fugue, like a conjurer drawing rabbits out of the hat!

Early in 1866 he removed permanently to Moscow, with which all his later musical fortunes are associated, accepting a teaching post in the new conservatory just established by Rubinstein’s brother Nicholas. His early attempts at composition, largely because of that same fatal facility, had displeased himself as well as his friends; on one of them, with that same impersonal candour always flashing out from him, he had scribbled the words: “dreadful muck.” Yet now he had the courage to attempt his first symphony, “Winter Dreams.” Musically it is not of great importance, any more than are indeed the second and third, one strongly “folk and the other rather featureless, in spite of a beautiful slow movement. But the First Symphony is interesting biographically for two reasons. Over it, to begin with , its composer worked his too-delicate nerves into a state of almost pathological strain that was to recur at intervals all his life. he suffers from insomnia, a sensation of hammering in the head, and even hallucinations; and so painful was the whole experience that he never again composed at night.

Of more importance is the vivid example his symphony give us of the contrast between his passionately narrow attitude in personal relations and his magnanimity and candour whenever he could get away from that stifling atmosphere into the free air of impersonal art. His eager wish for a performance of the symphony in St. Petersburg, where his works had so far been badly received, was peremptorily refused by his old teacher, Anton Rubinstein. Here was the kind of slight that any composer finds hard, but above all a morbidly shy man like Peter Ilyich, which his easily hurt pride. “This was the last straw,” writes Evans-”he never forgave Anton Rubinstein-he included din his dislike of the Directors of the Music Society, the Press and even St. Petersburg public. It was the last time he asked to have a work performed there.” And no doubt this “complex,” as a psychologist would be justified in calling it, was intensified by the great success of the symphony, a year later, in Moscow, when the young composer was called unexpectedly to the stage-terribly nervous, carelessly dressed, holding his hat in his hand, and making clumsy bows.

So much for the personal side. Now for the impersonal. Decades later, hardly more than a year before his death, he was asked for his memories of Rubinstein. “In him,” he wrote in answer, “I adore not only a great pianist and composer but a man of rare nobility, frank, loyal, generous, incapable of petty and vulgar sentiments . . . a man who towered far above the common herd. . . . I took him an overture,The Storm, guilty of all kinds of whims of form and orchestration. He was hurt, and said that it was not for the development of imbeciles that he took the trouble to teach composition. I left the Conservatory full of gratitude for my professor.”

Those who patronizingly regard Tchaikovsky as a neurotic will do well to ask themselves how many artists there have ever been who would be capable of such a disinterested detachment. But he goes further.

“I have always regarded him,” he continues, “as the greatest of artists and the noblest of men, but I shall never become his friend. . . . It would be difficult to explain the reason. I think my amour propre as a composer has a great deal to do with it. in my youth I was impatient to make my way. . . . Painful as it is, I must confess that he did nothing, absolutely nothing, to forward my plans. The most probably explanation of this mortifying luke-warmness is that Rubinstein does not care for my music, that my musical temperament is antipathetic to him. [ Tchaikovsky's own italics.]

“I still see him from time to time,” ends the letter, “and always with pleasure. At the time of his jubilee I had the happiness of going through much trouble and fatigue for him. . . . If I have told too little it is not my fault, nor that of Anton, but of fatality.”

Another letter equally lovable in its magnanimity is the long one-to long to quote here-of Jan. 5 1878, to his benefactress, Nadejda von Meck, about the Russian Nationalists or Kutschka (literally “Bunch”) of St. Petersburg, placed by circumstances and to some extent by tastes in opposition to himself and his Moscow fellows, but always treated with consideration by him. The essence of the opposition was that of Kutschka-Balakireff [sometimes spelled as Balakirev], Rimsky-Korsakoff, Mussorgsky, Borodin and Cesar Cui-were fanatical Nationalists, believed that music began and ended with folk song, were all, except Rimsky, rather amateurish in technique, and tended to regard Tchaikovsky-the glibness of whose poor moments indeed give them some excuse-as a “featureless eclectic.”

Some of them, notably Cui, were scarcely civil in the things they said of him. He, on the other hand, describes in his letter their merits as well as their defects with surprising freedom from bias. For example: “The young Petersburg composers are very gifted, but impregnated with the most horrible presumptuousness and a purely amateur conviction of their superiority. Rimsky-Korsakoff (Korsakov) is the only one among them who discovered. . . . that their doctrines had no sound basis, that their denial of authority and of the masterpieces was nothing but ignorance. . . . Cui is a gifted amateur. Borodin possesses a great talent, which has come to nothing because fate has led him in to the science laboratories instead of a vital music existence. Moussorgsky’s [Mussorgsky] gifts are perhaps the most remarkable of all, but his nature is narrow and he has no aspirations toward self-perfection. Besides, his nature is not of the finest quality, and he likes what is coarse, unpolished and ugly. . . .” “What a sad phenomenon,” he sums up. “so many talents from which, whit the exception of Rimsky, we can scarcely dare to hope for anything serious. But all the same, these forces exist. Thus Moussorgsky [Mussorgsky], with all his ugliness, speaks a new idiom. . . .We may reasonably hope that Russia will one day produce a whole school of strong men who will open new paths in art.”

The first decade of Tchaikovsky’s life in Moscow was one of much struggle, intensified by several attacks of the nervous depression and morbid self-disgust always dogging him, of first meeting with some of his great contemporaries, such as Turgenev, Tolstoi, Berlioz, Liszt, Saint-Saens, and Wagner, of an abortive love-affair with opera singer Desiree Artot, and above all of a varied production of many kinds of music, of all types from operas to string quartets, which laid the foundation of his skill and fame. Most of the operas, written hastily, uncritically , and sometimes on wretched librettos, were failures, the scores of which in a number of cases he himself destroyed. At the other end of the gamut of musical style are the three String Quartets (1871, ‘74, and ‘76). All have interest but none quite achieve the reticence and reserved beauty of true quartet style. The Andante cantabile movement of the first, opus 11, founded on a folk-song the composer heard whistled by a house painter, has become deservedly famous. The third, in E-Flat Minor, contains music of a funereal solemnity and tragic feeling anticipating the “Pathetic” Symphony. By far the most successful of all these early works are the orchestral ones where Tchaikovsky’s passionate emotion and flair for gorgeous colouring have full away: not perhaps the symphonies (No.2, 1872, and No.3 1875) but more dramatic conceptions like The Tempest (overture, 1873), the tone-poem Francesca da Rimini (1876) and two masterpieces, Romeo and Juliet composed in 1869, and produced and revised a year later, and the magnificent Piano Concerto in B Flat Minor, composed in 1874, at first intended for Nicholas Rubinstein, but owing to his indifference dedicated instead to Hans von Bulow. These works, both by quantity and quality, amply justify the solid and gradually spreading reputation of the middle seventies.

Then came a double crisis, involving two women, one of whom, touching Tchaikovsky on his personal and most vulnerable side, nearly wrecked him, and the other, lending timely aid to the impersonal artist in him, the side of him that was truly great, turned his life to new fruitfulness. Antonina Ivanovana Milyukoff hurled herself at his head, declaring in a letter her love for him. He, though misplaced chivalry, was quixotic enough to marry her, July6, 1877. Within a month he discovered their utter incompatibility and on the 26th wrote that a few more days of such life would have driven him mad. He left her for most of the Summer, but made another attempt in early September to live with her in Moscow. Before the month was out he fled to St. Petersburg, arriving in complete nervous collapse, and was taken to the hotel nearest the station, where he became unconscious for 48 hours and then passed into high fever. Ordered by the doctors to leave Russia, he gradually regained strength at Clarens, a quiet village on Lake Geneva, where he later did some of his best work. Neither partner to this unfortunate marriage had any blame to give the other.

Nadejda Fillaretovna von Meck [also spelled Nadezhda von Meck], the widow of a wealthy railway engineer, had fallen under the spell of Tchaikovsky’s music the year before, had given him several commissions, and had begun the long correspondence with him that reveals for us so much of his inner life. Nine years older than he and living in a socially different world, rich and apparently some what spoiled and autocratic but at any rate sincere in her love for his music, she had the good sense or the good luck (it was hard to tell which) to stipulate from the first that they should have no personal intercourse. They could not be sure to avoid one or two casual meetings at musical events, but it is said they never spoke to each other-they who wrote so inexhaustibly. Nothing could have been better suited to the queer psychology of Tchaikovsky. Secure from upsetting attacks of his personal privacy, he was provided form 1877 on, not only with an income of 6,000 rouble, which enabled him to give up teaching but with a tireless listener to all his opinions, beliefs, impressions, hopes, despairs, and aspirations.

Almost at once he resumed work on the splendid Fourth Symphony which he had begun before the unfortunate marriage; and early in 1878 finished it, and also his most successful opera, Eugene Onegin. That same year he wrote at Clarens the immensely popular Violin Concerto. Manfred followed in 1885; the Fifth Symphony in 1888; another successful opera, Pique Dame (The Queen of Spades), in 1890; the Casse-Noisette Ballet, from which the delightful Suite is drawn, in 1891. In these prosperous years his fame all over the world was rapidly increasing; he visited most of the European capitals for performances of his works; and there even began to be Tchaikovsky Festivals. Under the genial influence of all this sunshine he partially forgot, or put aside, his shyness, and took up the baton again, at first with many qualms, but gradually with so much assurance that in 1888 he made an international conducting tour, appearing in Leipzig, Hamburg, Prague, Paris, and London. Three years later he even ventured to come across the Atlantic and conduct his own works in New York at the ceremonies of the opening Carnegie Hall, as may be read in his letters in amusing details of his triumph and homesickness. And for the summers there were a series of modest but comfortable country houses in Russia where he could compose in peace, from Maidanova, with which he began to Klin, near Moscow. Only at the end of 1890, three years before his death, came the inevitable rupture with Madame von Meck, and by that time he was financially independent, so the break affected his spirits more than his music. In 1893 he wrote at Klin his most famous work, the “Pathetic” Symphony, and conducted it at St. Petersburg on Oct. 28. It was coolly received, and he did not live to witness its success. Only a few days later he drank a glass of unfiltered water, and died of cholera, Nov. 6, 1893.