Tchaikovsky: The Man And His Music Essay, Research Paper

ATchaikovsky=s music is not only one of the cornerstones of Russian musical society and world music . . . It is at the same time a creative and technical encyclopedia to which every Russian composer has reference in the course of his own work,@ commented Dimitri Shostakovich.1 This was a typical view held by Tchaikovsky=s contemporaries. He was well known and well respected, especially in his later years. In addition, Tchaikovsky was recognized as the most expressive Romantic composer in Russia.2 He was often idolized and put on a pedestal, particularly during his tour of the United States in 1891 when he conducted concerts of his own works in some of the leading concert halls. Tchaikovsky brought national attention to the Russian musical culture and composers. From this period forward Russian music was well received. Tchaikovsky did indeed make a great impact in Russia and around the world.

Peter Ilich Tchaikovsky, born in Votkinsk, Russia on May 7, 1840, was part of a family with comfortable financial circumstances. His father was a mining engineer and he was strongly attached to his mother. He first entered into the musical world at the age of five when he was given his first instruction on the piano. In spite of these lessons and Tchaikovsky=s love for music it never occurred to his parents to devote his life to music. Instead, at the age of ten, his family moved to St. Petersburg where they enrolled him in the School of Jurisprudence. Nine years later, in 1859, he passed into the Ministry of Justice as a clerk. He still loved music although it did not prove to be a major part of his life during this period. He was a member of the school choir and took piano lessons, but none of his instructors suspected a budding genius.3

A great tragedy that would prove to have a major impact on his life occurred while he was in St. Petersburg. When he was fourteen years old, a major cholera epidemic was raging through Russia, a quite common occurrence during his lifetime. His mother contracted the disease and subsequently died. Tchaikovsky was completely shattered by her death. AIt is likely that the emotional imbalance that characterized Tchaikovsky=s throughout his life dates from this tragedy.@4

He remained a clerk for three years. He hated his job but he worked feverishly at it for he worked hard at every task he was given. He continued to be drawn into the music world and he took piano and theory lessons. Finally, in 1862, he quit his job and devoted the rest of his life to music which he began by entering the St. Petersburg Conservatory. He graduated with a silver medal in 1865. After graduation he was unsure of what to do until 1866 when Nicholas Rubenstein offered him the job of professor of harmony at the newly formed Moscow Conservatory. It was here that he wrote his first serious works which included AA Festival Overture on the Danish National Hymn,@ his First Symphony in G AWinter Daydreams,@ and his first opera AThe Voyevode.@ Showing his desire for perfection he tore up the opera because he was dissatisfied with it and it wasn=t until 1949 that it was revived.5

Tchaikovsky=s first masterpiece was composed from 1869-1870. It was a symphonic fantasy based on Shakespeare=s Romeo and Juliet. ARomeo and Juliet@ was the first of Tchaikovsky=s works in which his superbly unique style is finally formed.6 ARomeo and Juliet@ shows Tchaikovsky=s ability to portray a particular mood or emotion through his music. It is thought that this ability was stimulated by his only love affair with the well known soprano Desiree Artot. One day she was in Warsaw and she met a baritone there. He proposed to her and she accepted without every giving another thought to Tchaikovsky. What makes this curious is the fact that this composer, who was generally regarded as sensitive and hot tempered, was able to forget her quite easily and continue on with his life.7

Tchaikovsky=s ability to put Desiree Artot out of his mind so easily stems from his homosexual tendencies which left him with Aa profound sense of guilt . . . natural shyness, melancholia, and emotional disturbance.@8 People were starting to ask questions and talk about him so Tchaikovsky decided he must do something to silence the critics. At the suggestion of his brother, Modest, with whom he was very close, Tchaikovsky decided to marry and settle down. An opportunity to accomplish this, which Tchaikovsky has referred to in letters as his Arash act,@ came in 1877. A women by the name of Antonina came to him one day and threw herself at him. She told him that if he did not marry her she would kill herself. Forced with this, in addition to the fact that he needed to marry, he approached her with an unorthodox marriage proposal.9 He told her that he Acould not love her but would be her faithful and grateful friend.@10 Then he asked her to marry him and she, of course, accepted. His marriage succeeded in stifling the rumors that were circulating about his homosexuality.

The marriage, which lasted all of two weeks, proved to be too much for Tchaikovsky. On the brink of a nervous breakdown he tried to commit suicide. One evening he ran to the Moscow river and plunged in up to his waist in hopes of contracting pneumonia. He managed to stumble home and was found delirious 24 hours later. The doctor said that he had gone through a period of great strain and that he should get away for a while. His family took him to a secluded home on a lake and left him in peace. He remained there for some time. He never wanted to, nor did, see his wife again.

In 1877 he was contacted by a widow, Nadezda von Meck, who expressed her interest in his genius and who genuinely loved his music. She offered to provide him with an annual Aallowance@ so that he could devote the majority of his time composing without having to worry about his finances. Thus a very strange and intimate relationship began in which they never met nor spoke but nonetheless knew each others most intimate secrets. Thus began the happiest period in Tchaikovsky=s life in which he produced his most successful opera, AEugene Onegin.@

Tchaikovsky really benefitted from this situation for he had found financial security in addition to the friendship of a woman who would make no demands upon him. Since he had been relieved of his financial duties he was able to embark upon a period in which he composed some of his greatest works. These works would help place him among the foremost composers of the period.11

During this period of compositional brilliance, Tchaikovsky also enjoyed increased popularity. This was due to the fact that the Slavic message portrayed in his music had finally caught fire throughout Europe and the United States.12 Whenever he conducted concerts of his own works he was greeted with wide acclaim. Among the works he composed during this period were his Fourth Symphony in F minor, which he dedicated to Mme. Von Meck, Capriccio Italien, and Overture Solennelle, better known as the 1812 Overture. His high place in Russian musical society was confirmed in 1884 when the Czar of Russia presented him with the Order of St. Vladimir. Four years later the government gave him a lifetime pension.13

Tchaikovsky=s unusual relationship with Mme. Von Meck continued for fourteen years. Shortly after receiving the news that he had been invited to the United States to conduct a tour, he received a letter from Mme. Von Meck indicating that she could no longer support him financially and that their intimate relationship had come to an end. The one aspect which was most disturbing to Tchaikovsky was the manner in which she ended the letter. It concluded with words that were totally devoid of warmth. She wrote, A… do not forget and think of me sometimes.@14 This would be the last he heard from Mme. Von Meck.

Tchaikovsky was in poor mental health upon his return to Russia from the United States. He had not heard from Mme. Von Meck in eight months when he received a letter from a mutual friend. She wrote that Mme. Von Meck was very ill and terribly upset and that she could no longer communicate as they had before.15 This event broke Tchaikovsky=s spirit and was a strain on his already deteriorating health.16 The remainder of his life was filled with sadness and depression. Tchaikovsky was never the same after that.

His greatest distinctions came during this time of sadness and despair. He was elected a member of the Academie Francaise and he received an honorary degree from the University of Cambridge. He composed his final work during this time of his greatest grief. It was his Sixth Symphony entitled Symphonie Pathetique, the Pathetic Symphony, in B minor. This symphony was a funeral dirge. He was saying goodbye to a dead friendship as well as, in essence, writing his own requiem for it was widely felt that he intended to commit suicide. The symphony premiered while he was still alive and his hundreds of worshipers wondered what the real thoughts of so sad a person were. ABut two weeks later when the Symphony Pathetique was performed in all its glory those who listened bowed their heads and wept for then they knew.@17

Five days after the premier Tchaikovsky drank a glass of unboiled water during a time when another cholera epidemic was raging through Russia. He contracted the disease and died shortly thereafter. His carelessness combined with the fact that his mother died of the same disease leads one to believe that he committed suicide.

Igor Stravinsky said, A[Tchaikovsky=s] works represent the essence of the Russian land and its people.@18 Tchaikovsky=s life was a mixture of fantasy and reality. His reality was full of depression and despair so he used a fantasy life, which he engaged in his music, to have happiness, contentment, and enjoyment. AHis music translates him into an entirely different world – a world in which he can forget himself and become an impersonal instrument in the hands of a higher power.@19

Tchaikovsky was truly Russia=s greatest composer. He brought national attention to Russia=s musical society and he was the first Russian composer to tour the United States. The impact he had on western culture was indescribable but can be best expressed in a quote from Herman Laroche who said, AYou are the greatest musical talent of contemporary Russia . . . in ou see the greatest, or rather, the only hope of our musical future.@

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