Peter Tchaikovsky Essay, Research Paper

Peter Ilyich Tchaikovsky is the author of six symphonies and the finest and most popular operas in the Russian repertory. Tchaikovsky was also one of the founders of the school of Russian music. He was a brilliant composer with a creative imagination that helped his career throughout many years. He was completely attached to his art. His life and art were inseparably woven together. “I literally cannot live without working,” Tchaikovsky once wrote, “for as soon as one piece of work is finished and one would wish to relax, I desire to tackle some new work without delay.” The purpose of this paper is to give you a background concerning Tchaikovsky’s biography, as well as to discuss his various works of art.

Tchaikovsky was born on May 7, 1840 in Vatkinsk, a town about 600 miles east of Moscow. His father, Ilya Petrovich, earned a profitable living by working as a director in the metal working industry and as a mine inspector. His mother Alexandra was a busy housekeeper and mother of six, with Peter being the second oldest. Peter began his studies of music when he was just five years old. Music had became an important pastime to upper-middle class. It was only a short while before Peter’s talents began to shine. Peter, after taking some basic lessons, began to have a great feel for the piano. At the age of 10 he enrolled at a Russian boarding school called Jurisprudence in the town of St. Petersburg. There he would study the basic arts where he soon found a passion for music.

Only four short years later Peter’s mother died in 1854. This tragic event, some say, sparked a great emotion in the young 14-year-olds life. His mother’s death had a lot to do with the drive and passion behind his music. This parting from his mother was quite a shock and very painful, because he and his mother were very close. The young Peter would enter a ministry of Justice as a clerk in 1859 (Mason 1). Tchaikovsky stayed there four years despite the long journey to Western Europe and increasing involvement in music. In 1863 he entered the conservatory where he took private teachings and focused all his energy to his music and compositions.

Three years later in 1866 he and his family had moved to Moscow with a professorship of harmony at a new conservatory. Even by this time very little of his music had pleased the conservative musical establishment or the more nationalist group. It was not until 1868 when his 1st Symphony had a good public reception when heard in Moscow.

Not even a year later Tchaikovsky wrote his first opera the Voyevada. He later used this piece in his next opera the Oprichnik, which won some success at St. Petersburg in 1874. It was then that a critic named Balakirev requested that he write a work on Romeo and Juliet, which would later be known as the Fantasy Overture. This specific work was rewritten many times until it met the requirements of Balakirev. This romantic piece is a symphony where each theme stood for a character in the drama. It is these expressive themes that make his first works well defined.

The symphony Romeo and Juliet is a love song in sonata form. It is a Fantasy Overture and not a symphonic poem, because Tchaikovsky makes no attempt to tell the story in order or in detail (Hanson 118). The piece opens with solemn thoughts of Friar Laurence. The main part of the work is a contrast between street-brawls, feuding families, and the emotional theme of the tragic love of Romeo and Juliet. It is very dramatic and uses harmony to resolve tension throughout the piece. In-between scenes and moods he uses vivid contrasts of pace. Tchaikovsky felt and understood Romeo and Juliet, creating it with a blend of passion and compassion.

In Romeo and Juliet, Tchaikovsky uses a strong assortment of alerting horns and soft dramatic strings. This arrangement paints adventurous tones of great emotion. I found this symphony to be a thrill ride of sound, creating an exciting story for your ears and mind.

He continued to work hard and vigorously on his next piece and won great reviews for his Second Symphony. He had also composed two string quartets and his first piano concerto where he uses the heroic and the lyrical between soloist and orchestra. This piano concerto had been written for and dedicated to another critic named Nicholas Rubenstein. Rubenstein disliked the piece and wanted Tchaikovsky to alter it to his liking. Tchaikovsky, however, did not want to make the changes that Rubenstein ordered. He later dedicated it to Hans von Bulow who later gave its premiere in Boston (Moreno 1).

In 1875 Peter posted his Third Symphony, Swan Lake, which he converted into an opera in Moscow. The very next year he found himself in Paris and deeply depressed because of his homosexuality. He continued on creating the Fantasia Francesca de Rimini and the Rocco variations for cello and orchestra. Meanwhile the Vakula, which had won over much competition, had its premiere that very autumn.

At the end of this year a very wealthy widow Nadzha von Meck contacted him. She was a great admirer of his music and was eager and willing to give him financial security. They communicated with one another for over 14 years, but they never met face to face.

Tchaikovsky, once again, dealt with various forms of depression and anxiety due to his sexuality around 1877. Peter thought that his problems would be solved through marriage. He quickly contacted the woman, whom he had first rejected, and demanded an immediate marriage. This marriage shortly became a disaster and Peter let her at once.

These sudden turns of events threw him into an even greater depression. He attempted suicide several times but could never actually go through it (Abraham 13). However, at this time of great emotion, he began to compose two of his greatest works, the Fourth Symphony and Eugene Oniegin.

Peter needed to find quiet and peace at mind, so he kept himself close to Switzerland and other European countries. Later that year of 1878 Peter resigned his professorship. He continued on his piece Eugene Oniegin, which was performed in Moscow and was overwhelmingly popular.

Still struggling with his sexuality, he could not compose his music with the passion he once had. The next piece, which was written in 1882, was dedicated to the memory of the late Nicholas Rubenstein. Rubenstein, as stated earlier, had been a critic of his music in his early years of being a new composer (Mason 1). Two years later in 1884, at the request of Balakirev, he produced his Manfred Symphony (Abraham 14). Tchaikovsky traveled wildly for the next four years, which seem to help his troubled mind an enabled him to complete his Fifth Symphony. It kept him going strong for the next three years in order to complete his next two ballets, Sleeping Beauty and The Nutcracker. He also composed another opera, which was a Rocco piece of music that was set to Russian music and became very successful.

The Nutcracker, which was written in 1892, was his most famous ballet. It is in ternary, or three-part form (A-B-A). There is a variety of instruments, such as brass horns. It is a very lively ballet with lots of wonderful dancing. The music itself practically paints the image of the story as you listen. The first act takes place at a Christmas party where two children are unwrapping gifts. The little girl Clara receives the nutcracker as a gift. Later that night she sneaks back down stairs to see her nutcracker. The second act takes place at the land of sweets, which is ruled by the sugar plum fairy.

In Tchaikovsky’s The Nutcracker, he exhibits a full arrangement of musical sound giving the listener a suspenseful treat. The strings in this piece seem to fade just enough to keep you holding on until being swept away by his powerful and charming melodies.

In 1893 he returns to his country and made his final piece, the Sixth Symphony. It was composed of four movements; the first movement was about passion; the second and third were about disappointment; and the fourth was about death. This final work was performed on October 28, 1893.

Peter Tchaikovsky died nine days after the premiere of his Sixth Symphony. He contracted cholera, but many believe that his individual stress may have caused him to commit suicide. It is stated that he may have tried to poison himself, or had someone else do it for him. However, no one really knows for sure what happened (Koolbergen 5).

Peter Tchaikovsky was one of the world’s most talented composers. His music compositions portrayed emotion and feelings that Tchaikovsky truly felt and understood. He believed in the power of creative reason, in the might and the harmony of the universe (Shostakovich 3). He suffered through a lot of depression, such as the death of his mother and his sexuality. He attempted suicide many times, but could not go through with it. Even with his troubled life, he rose above and amazed many people with his talents. He had a creative passion for his works that is indescribable.

Abraham, Gerald. The Music of Tchaikovsky. New York: W.W. Norton &

Company, 1946.

Hanson, Lawrence, and Elisabeth Hanson. Tchaikovsky: The Man Behind the

Music. New York: The Cornwell Press, 1965.

Koolbergen, Jeroen. Tchaikovsky: 1840-1893. New York: Smithmark, 1995

Mason, Daniel. “Concise Calendar.” New Grove Dictionary of Music and

Musicians. 1998. http://www.geocities.com/Vienna/5648/CCalend.htm (17 March 2001)

Moreno, Joe. “Piano Concerto No.1.” Mozart Experience/Beethoven Experience.

1998.http://www.geocities.com/Vienna/5648/Piano.htm (17 March 2001)

Shostakovich, Dmitri. Russian Symphony: Thoughts About Tchaikovsky. New

York: Books for Libraries Press, 1947.