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Swan Songs

by Alex Ross

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Not long ago, historians denounced certain embroideries of history in Oliver Stone's film "JFK." Imagine the fuss that might have erupted if a reputable reference work had echoed Stone's speculations word for word—if, say, a new edition of the Columbia Encyclopedia had contained this sentence: "That Kennedy was killed on Lyndon Johnson's orders by right-wing mercenaries cannot be doubted." Fortunately, standards for political history are higher than standards for music history. The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians fastens that table-thumping phrase "cannot be doubted" onto a conspiracy theory about Peter Ilyich Tchaikovsky, who died in 1893, in St. Petersburg. Although four doctors gave cholera as the cause of his death, the New Grove chose to circulate a Soviet-era rumor that the composer had poisoned himself at the behest of a "court of honor" of former law-school classmates who were scandalized by his homosexuality.

This penny-dreadful version of Tchaikovsky's death has proved so popular that the scholar Alexander Poznansky recently devoted a whole book—"Tchaikovsky's Last Days"—to refuting it. Poznansky points out that no poison could have duplicated the symptoms of cholera and that the suicide theory requires a vast machinery of coverup. (Dozens of witnesses, acting rather like members of the L.A.P.D. a few years back, must have worked around the clock to manufacture the necessary medical evidence.) Poznansky also shows that Tchaikovsky had no free time during his St. Petersburg visit for any confrontation with powerless schoolfellows. He was exulting over the première of his Sixth Symphony and buzzing with plans. The day after he was alleged to have taken poison, he wrote a letter laboriously listing possible dates for a trip to Odessa.

Still, the story won't go away. In the last few years, it has resurfaced in a biography by Anthony Holden and in a widely distributed Tchaikovsky guide by David Nice. British writers seem particularly attached to the "court of honor," perhaps because it reminds them of public-school traditions. Others simply love a good conspiracy theory. But the real impetus for the suicide myth is the music itself, and, in particular, the Adagio Lamentoso of the Sixth Symphony. At the première in St. Petersburg, audiences wondered at this dying roar of sorrow, which ended the symphony as no symphony had ever been ended before. Nine days later, the composer was dead. People began to speculate about the message of the Adagio. "It is a sort of swan song, a presentiment of imminent death," a critic mused. Rumors spread, intertwined with talk of buggery. Did Tchaikovsky contract cholera deliberately? Did his love for a young nephew turn

into a fatal obsession? In 1935, Klaus Mann, Thomas Mann's son, published a lurid biographical novel entitled "Pathetic Symphony," which spread the rumors westward. Klaus, whom a friend called "that tragic twerp," remade Tchaikovsky in his own image.

The fictions about Tchaikovsky affected the way people heard his music. The musicologist Richard Taruskin has noted that just after the turn of the century—in the wake of the trial of Oscar Wilde—critics began to describe the composer as "pathological" and "hysterical." They suggested that his manipulations of manly Beethovenian forms were weak and effeminate. In part, this was a refined version of the German bias against Russian music: according to the theoretician Carl Dahlhaus, Tchaikovsky's ideas were "hardly suitable, at least by Beethovenian standards, for establishing a symphonic movement spanning hundreds of measures." Tchaikovsky came to be seen as a late stage in the decadence of tonal music—the point at which theme turned into melody, classicism into kitsch.

Despite the composer's enduring popularity, many postwar performances have repeated the cliché of Tchaikovsky as a cornball neurotic, pounding away at the obvious emotional buttons. Leonard Bernstein was a notorious offender. The ostentatiously grieving tone that Bernstein brought, in his later years, to the "Pathétique" almost drove me away from the composer altogether. I had also picked up the general opprobrium that textbooks heaped on Tchaikovsky: his themes were beautiful but undeveloped; he ran them through mindless sequences; his climaxes all aspired to the condition of the "1812" Overture. I've since realized that Tchaikovsky, more than most composers, rises and falls with the performance. When he is played badly, he sounds banal. When he is played well, he sounds sophisticated. When he is played with real fervor, as he was recently in New York, he makes Carl Dahlhaus sound like a fool.

It has been a Tchaikovsky-heavy season so far: Valery Gergiev conducted three Tchaikovsky concerts at Carnegie Hall, and at Alice Tully Hall Leon Botstein presented an appendix to his Tchaikovsky festival from last summer at Bard College. Meanwhile, Matthew Bourne's radical revision of "Swan Lake" is running on Broadway. What the Botstein and Gergiev concerts had in common was an interest in overlooked corners of the composer's output—the lighter, more playful pieces, which match the new image of the composer in Poznansky's book. (He was, it turns out, not neurotic or hysterical in the least. He was a proud, aristocratic, libidinous character, who found, despite a disastrous marriage and various silly flings with peasant boys, a rare kind of emotional repose.) One discovery for me was the Concert Fantasia in G for Piano and Orchestra, which Botstein conducted on Halloween night. It is a world apart from the bombastic First Piano Concerto: it is crisp, fresh, and more than a bit goofy. The first movement has an endless cadenza in which the pianist drums noisily in the bass. The second movement, called "Contrasts," is a whirlwind of crosscut juxtapositions, fake endings, and stylized burlesques. At one point, a solemnly surging string line is repeatedly interrupted by a tootling, klezmerlike clarinet: Tchaikovsky seems to be laughing at himself. Alan Gampel negotiated the daredevil solo part with finesse, and Botstein drew unusually lively playing from the American Symphony.

At Carnegie, Gergiev led his glorious Kirov Orchestra through the major works of Tchaikovsky's last two years: the "Pathétique," the "Nutcracker," the Third Piano Concerto, the

symphonic poem “Voyevoda,” and the opera “Iolanta” (in a concert performance with the Kirov Chorus and familiar Kirov singers). To hear all this music within the space of three days was to feel the electricity in Tchaikovsky’s mind at the end of his life. He had become both an experimenter and a perfectionist: he was willing to try anything, then cast it off with a shrug if the experiment flopped. He took a dislike to “Voyevoda,” a grim piece with a “Götterdämmerung” atmosphere, and tried to destroy the score. The Third Concerto, a confection in the vein of the Concert Fantasia, might have met the same fate if the composer had lived to hear it: although Alexander Toradze coaxed some beauty from the solo part—in particular, a long, shimmering trill with “Pathétique”-like harmonies underneath—the orchestra burred meaninglessly around him. I doubted at first whether the overfamiliar “Nutcracker” would work any better as a concert piece, but I was won over by an onslaught of exquisite sonorities in the orchestra, from shining wind choirs to beautifully rumbling cellos and basses. “Iolanta” is similar in tone and enjoyed a similar success. It is neglected in opera houses because of its lack of plot—a blind woman falls for a count and regains her sight after a regimen of love duets—but it bewitches the ear with its heightened lyricism, which is free-form and almost impressionistic in effect.

Was Tchaikovsky, in his last years, seeking a new world of sweetness and light? Did he want to Mediterraneanize music, in Nietzsche’s phrase? The “Pathétique” breaks the pattern. It reverses Beethoven’s narrative of transcendence: it goes from darkness into light and then plunges into a deeper darkness. It’s surprising, in a way, that the piece is so well liked, for the jump from the triumph of the third movement to the tragedy of the fourth produces a fearsome kind of musical whiplash. In Gergiev’s raging, ragged performance, the transition was almost too much. The final G-major chords of the march movement blared raspily, with Bs and Ds in the horns and trombones overwhelming the root G. (Did Tchaikovsky plan this shaky resolution in his scoring? Only four of the brass and wind instruments play a G.) The B and D pivot easily into the B minor of the Adagio, and Gergiev underlined that connection by leading into the first string chords without pause—thereby cutting off the usual cheers. The finale was dominated by a smoky blur of lower strings, with a clarinet or a bassoon crying out from time to time and a trio of trombones snarling horribly before the end. Gergiev didn’t seem to be seeking a beautiful sound; instead, he got something raw, almost brutal.

Richard Taruskin has commented that Tchaikovsky’s music “creates community”—that it deals in “concrete imagery explicitly derived from shared human experience.” But nothing is less fixed than shared experience: listeners and performers alter the music by the force of the feeling that they bring to it. In the case of the “Pathétique,” art and life join in a vicious circle: the music has changed the way that the life has been perceived, and the life has changed the way that the music is heard. Something even more complex has happened in Matthew Bourne’s production of “Swan Lake,” in which the familiar strains of Tchaikovsky’s score seem utterly transformed by a voluptuous, savage choreography of male swans. Has a staid old work been recharged by contemporary energies? Or has a clever contemporary notion drawn sustenance from grand nineteenth-century passions? God only knows—but it’s an astounding spectacle.

It’s impossible to imagine how Tchaikovsky might have reacted to his more adventurous latter-day interpreters, but he was aware of the potentially disorienting, hallucinatory effects of his music. Two days after the première of the “Pathétique,” he wrote to his publisher, “Something

strange is going on with this symphony! It is not that it wasn't liked, but it has caused some bewilderment. As far as I am concerned, I am prouder of it than of any of my other compositions." In apparent haste, he added, "But we shall speak of this soon, for I will be in Moscow on Saturday."