

Notes on the Program

By Steven Blier, Artistic Director of New York Festival of Song

This past summer I dug into David Brown's *Tchaikovsky: The Man and His Music*, eager to plumb the depths of the Russian master's psychology and artistic impulses. Naturally I was most focused on the history of his songs, which were my constant soundtrack in July and August. I was quickly disappointed. In the very first chapter, Brown wrote: "I decided, sometimes very regretfully, to take virtually no account of his many songs and short instrumental pieces, nor to examine in any depth larger pieces that are universally agreed to be less than his best."

It is not unusual for biographers to skate over a composer's art song output. Unless they are writing about musicians best known for their songs—Schubert, or Britten, or Sondheim—they prefer to dwell on works that last three hours, not three minutes. Undaunted, I turned to Richard Sylvester's book *Tchaikovsky's Complete Songs*. His companion volume about Rachmaninoff had opened my eyes to the emotional and financial reasons behind each of that composer's cycles, which limned his development as a musician.

Useful as Sylvester's book has been, I was once again disappointed. Tchaikovsky's 107 songs don't trace a similar arc to Rachmaninoff's, which also have fascinating pedigrees of artistic patronage and amorous intrigue. And they are stylistically more consistent than Rachmaninoff's. Like many successful composers, Tchaikovsky turned out song opuses between operas and ballets and symphonies in order to recharge his artistic batteries, to reward a favorite singer, occasionally to flatter a member of the aristocracy, or to make some cash.

Yet I felt there was still some mystery to be solved, some key to the special eloquence I was discovering as I obsessively listened to the

six CDs of Tchaikovsky's romances. Anthony Holden's recent and more controversial biography finally helped me see what these songs were really about: a coded way for a celebrity to air something of his private truth to the world without actually revealing any secrets. By now everyone knows that Tchaikovsky was gay—he was outed decades ago. But so much material relating to his sexuality had been long hidden: his letters and diaries were censored by the Russian government, and his brother Modest's biography sanitized much of the composer's personal life. Modest had good reason to control the Tchaikovsky legend. He was also gay, and he too had plenty to conceal.

The more I understood Tchaikovsky's personality, the more I felt his presence hovering in his songs. This is true of many composers, of course—Schumann's *Lieder* are also intensely subjective—but it is more intensely true of Tchaikovsky than of almost anyone else I can think of. They are permeated with a sense of suppressed attraction (often tempered by social reticence) coupled with a feverish, fearful erotic charge. An atmosphere of supercharged silence was a ubiquitous feature of Russian poetry, certainly not unique to Tchaikovsky. But who else wrote this many songs about couples gripped by passion, yet unable to speak? There are more than 55 settings of Goethe's poem "Nur wer die Sehnsucht kennt" ("None but the lonely heart"). Tchaikovsky's offering, with its pulsating off-beats in the left hand, its full-throated climax followed by a (guilty) silence, suggests a more urgent appeal than any other of the famous settings. And there is a feature of the translation that subtly differentiates this song from the Goethe original. Pianist Nikolay Verevkin pointed out, "Tchaikovsky adjusted Mey's original Russian verses. They sound more sensual and more personal, and there is an immediate reference

to the male gender in the first line—“only another man who knows my kind of longing can understand what I am going through.”

Tchaikovsky’s songs are a testament to three artistic and psychological trends that converged around 1870. In literature, the primacy of lyric poetry was giving way to the ascendancy of the novel. The popular Russian verses of the 1820s and 30s were about the confinements of social protocols, the exquisite torture of having to maintain composure while in the throes of passion. The novel, on the other hand, was a medium for lengthy confession, the exposure of intimacies. In his songs Tchaikovsky managed to meld both currents. They are vocally red-blooded, sometimes flamboyant—novelistic, one could say. But they allude constantly to the unspoken, to revelations made by glances and furtive touches rather than explicit avowals, evoking the poetic tradition of early-nineteenth century artists. Tchaikovsky also gravitated to texts that were heated but ambiguous, allowing his performers and listeners to imagine their own scenarios. And he often used genderless poetry, even seeking out verses that lacked past tense verbs which have masculine and feminine forms—a distinction impossible to translate in English, but clear to a Russian speaker.

The late nineteenth century was also when the idea of homosexuality coalesced as an identity. Being gay was no longer something you did over and over again (and felt guilty about). It was something you were (and felt guilty about). In his famous essay *1870—The Birth of Homosexuality*, Michel Foucault details the way gayness was newly understood at that time: “a kind of interior androgyny, a hermaphroditism of the soul. The sodomite had been a temporary aberration; the homosexual was now a species.” It would be nice to think that this would somehow lead to the beginning of gay liberation, but it only served to codify the homophobia that was rampant in

Russia. Yes, there was a thriving subculture in the big metropolitan areas, but the enclaves were safe only as long as they stayed hidden.

The third trend was the new star-status accorded to musicians, writers, and performers in Tchaikovsky’s era. More than ever before, Russian artists were in the public eye, adored by audiences who wanted to feel a personal closeness to them. It became important to create a public image that revealed what was acceptable and concealed what was taboo. The pressure affected Tchaikovsky more than his colleagues. He was the most famous musician in Russia, revered in European capitals and the toast of New York. And he was a gay man with a strong sex drive, obsessed with adolescent men.

It is a risky business to see a composer’s works as autobiographical. His songs were not consciously intended to function as his diary. On the contrary, they were meant for mass consumption and healthy revenues, and they fed both city-dwellers and families in the provinces the free, soulful expression they craved. But taken as a whole, they also amount to a self-portrait, a retroactive guided tour of his psyche. His very first song, “My genius, my angel, my friend,” bears a mysterious dedication, thirteen dots that run to the right-hand margin of the page. They are thought to be a stand-in for the thirteen letters in the name Sergey Kireyev, one of Tchaikovsky’s earliest love-objects—a “strong, durable, and pure” adoration, according to Modest Tchaikovsky. His infatuation was probably rendered all the more intense by being unconsummated. This was the only time Tchaikovsky left behind a clue—even an ambiguous one—on a manuscript. He was still a teenager of 16 (and Kireyev was a 12-year old). The song remained unpublished for many years. Yet from then on, almost every song until his final one, “Again, as before, I am alone,” reveals something essential about Tchaikovsky’s inner world, with all its passions, its joys, its griefs, and its fears.

We begin our concert with a tribute to Tchaikovsky's family, to whom he remained very close for his entire life. He wrote most of the opus 46 duets in 1880 while staying with his sister Sasha and his brother Anatoly at Sasha's home in Kamenka. Everyone in the family sang, including his niece Tanya. The six duets were intended as a gift, parlor music for his relatives to sing and for him to play. Judging from the vocal and pianistic demands of opus 46, they must have been quite proficient amateurs. Tchaikovsky dedicated them to Tanya, a troubled young woman to whom he was extremely devoted. Sadly, her life ended a mere seven years later, at the age of 25. By then she had borne an out-of-wedlock child and gotten seriously addicted to morphine. Tchaikovsky ministered to her throughout all of her troubles, but the damage was irreparable. These duets are bittersweet reminiscences of a young woman whose life veered fatally off-course.

For the next group of songs, we present an ad hoc song-cycle we have created with the title, "Tchaikovsky's Men." As one critic pointed out, biographies about Tchaikovsky tell as much about the biographer as they do about the man himself. Seen through the eyes of Anthony Holden, Tchaikovsky was as conflicted about the exposure of his sexuality as he was compulsive about acting on it. The constant threat of revelation and public shame were an inexorable blot on his happiness. Another Tchaikovsky expert, Alexander Poznansky, attempts a rosier picture. In his telling, Tchaikovsky was content with the parade of male prostitutes, bathhouse attendants, and servants who roamed through his life. Poznansky evokes a late-19th century Saint Petersburg as free-wheeling as San Francisco in the 1970s.

This much is clear: Tchaikovsky may not have lacked for bed partners. But he knew he could never live an openly gay life with a lover, and this made him sad. His friend, the poet Aleksey Apukhtin, did, to the composer's astonishment.

But a man with Tchaikovsky's fame could not afford that luxury. Nor was he constituted for long-term relationships. Once a man reached the ripe age of 20 or 21, he had aged out. There would always be a revolving door.

The Russian censors did an excellent job of blotting out the most explicit revelations in Tchaikovsky's letters to his brother. But much remains: the effusive romantic, the dreamer, the idealistic knight described by Modest, the timorous suppliant, the nighttime cruiser. The concurrent theme of silence—the love that dares not speak its name, or that speaks in riddles and ambiguities—gives these love songs their special character.

So does Tchaikovsky's magnificent music: the resigned, dying fall of "We were sitting together" leading unexpectedly to an outcry of despair; the giddy, effusive chatter of "It's painful, it's sweet"; the lyricism, simultaneously soaring and wounded, of "None but the lonely heart"; the fragrant rosininess of "It was in the early spring." But for me, the true masterpiece is "At the ball." The song's minor-key waltz music is faint, like the memory of a dance party. An avowal of love is made alone, in hushed tones, after the fact—a mysterious exchange of glances now translated into a private erotic reverie.

The program gives Tchaikovsky a quick breather while we sample a trio of songs by his musical intimates. Virtuoso pianist, conductor, and composer Anton Rubinstein (1829-1894) was Tchaikovsky's primary teacher at the Saint Petersburg Conservatory. Only 11 years older than his famous pupil, Rubinstein maintained an enormous influence over him. He was a stern professor, withholding praise but generous with lacerating criticism. Famously temperamental and outspoken—not afraid of criticizing the Tsar himself—he inspired adulation and fear in Tchaikovsky. While the famous "Russian Five" promoted the incorporation of Russian folk themes

into classical composition, Rubinstein (who trained in Germany) was vehemently opposed to what he saw as the cheapening incursion of Orientalism. While those may have been his rules for orchestral music, he seems to have had more liberal ideas when it came to vocal music. Today we'll hear a song from one of his best cycles: "Zuleika," the opening number of *Songs* by Mirza-Schaffy. There is no mistaking the wailing, Eastern cadences of Azerbaijan, the source of the original poetry.

During his professional career Tchaikovsky leaned on only a few trusted colleagues, and his most dependable source of support was Sergei Taneyev (1856-1915). Taneyev had been one of Tchaikovsky's composition students at the Moscow Conservatory, and he remained extremely close to his teacher after graduation. A virtuoso pianist, he premiered Tchaikovsky's *Second Piano Concerto* and his *Piano Trio in A-minor*. He was a brilliant thinker, analytical and articulate, and Tchaikovsky solicited his critical evaluations. Taneyev took his former teacher at his word, and could be painfully specific detailing what he heard as flaws in a new work. He felt no need to laud its positive aspects, which he felt to be self-evident. Tchaikovsky wrote to Taneyev, "I know you are absolutely sincere and I think a great deal of your judgment. But I also fear it."

Anton Arensky (1861-1906) is a more peripheral figure in Tchaikovsky's life. They were colleagues at the Moscow Conservatory and he became a frequent guest at Tchaikovsky's house in Maidanovo. Tchaikovsky had a soft spot for Arensky, bestowing frequent guidance and occasional criticism—the younger composer had an unruly penchant for 5/4 time. Arensky wedded his name permanently to his friend's when he wrote his *Variations on a Theme by Tchaikovsky*. It became one of his best-known works. A graceful miniaturist with a gift for melody and a fine command of piano-writing, Arensky is a natural songwriter.

Women may never have invaded Tchaikovsky's bedroom. But four women played key roles in his life, claiming their own kind of intimacy. The first was his mother, whom he adored. Anthony Holden paints Alexandra Andreyevna d'Assier as an aloof, chilly woman, prone to selfishness. But her son Pyotr idealized her, and when he was sent off to school 800 miles from home at age 10, he nearly collapsed with grief. Four years later she died of cholera, and he mourned her loss for the rest of his life. We evoke her with one of Tchaikovsky's most famous songs, the opus 16 "Lullaby."

The idea of marriage seemed like a solution to a number of Tchaikovsky's fears, and he made a couple of attempts at it. The first was with the charismatic French soprano Desirée Artôt. They met in 1868 when she was touring Moscow with an Italian opera company. Tchaikovsky was dazzled by her singing and her physical grace, and she too found the composer an interesting prospect. They carried on a flirtation for a number of weeks. They even discussed marriage, though their friends counseled each of them not to tie the knot. She was eventually persuaded that wedding a neophyte composer, no matter how promising, would be a burden. And he came to see that he would need to give up his life in Russia and travel as part of her entourage, or force her to live unwillingly in Moscow. She also had probably gotten wind of his homosexuality. Tchaikovsky knew in his heart he was better off as Artôt's adoring fan, not her husband. She never broke off the engagement officially, but when she later married a Spanish baritone in her company the news got to Tchaikovsky. No doubt he was relieved and offended in equal measure. Over the years they encountered one another, at first with some discomfort. But by the time of their last meeting in 1887, they were finally able to put the past behind them and converse comfortably as old friends. Artôt asked him to write her a song, and he obliged with the *Six French Romances*, op 65, a sweet tribute to her and a gift to generations of music-lovers.

As Tchaikovsky reached his late thirties, he convinced himself that he needed to get married. He imagined it would quell the rumors about his homosexuality, and he was certain it would make his father happy. In 1877, he received two passionate letters from a woman who had been his former student at the Moscow Conservatory. Tchaikovsky remembered nothing about her, but she had set her sights firmly on him. Her timing was right. Moving in on him forcibly at a vulnerable moment, Antonina Miliukova wrested a marriage proposal from Tchaikovsky. There was no real courtship, just a half-year's delay between the agreement and the wedding. During this time, Tchaikovsky went off to compose his greatest opera, *Eugene Onegin*, for which he also wrote his own libretto. It is thought that Tchaikovsky identified with the opera's heroine, the love-struck Tatiana. But he certainly had much in common with the cold title character, who is able to love Tatiana "only as a brother."

Of course, the marriage was an unmitigated disaster. Antonina could most charitably be described as naïve and innocent, but she was also willfully obtuse, cripplingly conventional, and prone to bad decisions. Tchaikovsky suffered a series of nervous breakdowns and a flirtation with suicide before separating from her forever. Divorce was complicated and dangerous, and ran the risk of exposing precisely what Tchaikovsky was trying to hide. The marriage was never dissolved. Antonina managed to wrest a decent financial settlement from her husband—annual hush money that would be canceled if she breathed a word of her husband's sexual orientation. Her life ended sadly: three out-of-wedlock children given up for adoption, and two decades spent in a mental institution.

The fourth woman in Tchaikovsky's life was his wealthy patroness, Nadezhda von Meck. From 1877 to 1890, they enjoyed an impassioned epistolary relationship while Von Meck supported him with a generous stipend. Her

one stipulation was that they never meet: Tchaikovsky was her ideal, and she preferred the perfection of love at a distance to the ups and downs of a normal friendship. Von Meck was zealously devoted to Tchaikovsky, and he to her. She could be manipulative: she enjoyed being in the same foreign city when her protégé was traveling, and financed his train fares and hotel bills. She arranged for him to stay at her estate when she was away so that he could share her living space. Tchaikovsky felt compelled to bend to her will, even when such stays were not convenient. But more than anything, von Meck reveled in his music, his meditations on composing, his thoughts on ethics and spirituality. Their intense intimacy never waned, but alas, von Meck's fortune and health did. She was unable to continue paying his yearly allowance, and her family began to intercept Tchaikovsky's letters to her. It was a sad ending to one of the most selfless—and most peculiar—love stories in classical music. We'll honor her with Tchaikovsky's noblest song of praise, "Does the day reign?"

Tchaikovsky's early death at age 53 was a tragedy—and a mystery. The stated cause was cholera, contracted either through unboiled water (the official version) or sexual contact (a privately rumored story). But there are enough alternate explanations and differing testimonies to fill several books. Several of them lie on my table as I write these words, with analyses that can get unpleasantly graphic. One theory is that the composer chose to end his life because of his overwhelming, impossible love for his nephew, Bob Davidov, to whom he dedicated the *Pathétique* symphony. Another is that his suicide was ordered by the Tsar after the composer had seduced the wrong 15-year old boy. The most convincing, and the most chilling, is that he acceded to a sentence of suicide handed down by a hastily assembled "court of honor" composed of fellow alumni from his old law school. It seems that a certain Duke Stenbok-Fermor was disturbed by the attentions Tchaikovsky was lavishing on his

nephew, and wrote a letter of accusation to the Tsar. Nicolai Jacobi, the man appointed to deliver the letter, decided to give it instead to his colleagues at the School of Jurisprudence, in order to avoid the possibility of scandal and exile for Tchaikovsky. Their grim verdict was that the composer should take his own life. The symptoms of arsenic poisoning are very similar to those of cholera. There is some strong evidence that this is true—stemming from a decades-old confession, passed through several generations, from Nicolai Jacobi's widow.

We'll never know the truth absolutely—whether it be cholera, depression, suicide, or decades of cigarettes and alcohol. What I do know is this: Tchaikovsky's last symphony was his most tragic piece of music, seen at its premiere as a memento mori, a requiem. There is a strange moment in the first movement when a theme emerges in the trombones, bearing no relationship to the music surrounding it. It is a quote from the Russian Orthodox Mass for the Dead: "And may his soul rest with the souls of all the saints."

Tchaikovsky returned again and again to the subject of death, often offering comfort to those left behind to mourn. But his last song is his most desolate, a fitting companion to the *Pathétique* symphony: "Again, as before, I am alone." He knew the game was over.

"If you speak a secret, you lose it, it becomes public," writes Wayne Koestenbaum in *The Queen's Throat*. "But if you sing the secret, you magically manage to keep it private, for singing is a barricade of codes." Listening to Tchaikovsky's songs, so filled with romance, eroticism, and a profound desire for oblivion, we penetrate Tchaikovsky's secret, and take him to our hearts where he will always be safe.

Many thanks to Nikolay Verevkin for his generous support and his invaluable understanding of Tchaikovsky's oeuvre; to Antonina Chehovska for her help with the translations; and to Philip Ross Bullock, whose article "Ambiguous Speech and Eloquent Silence: The Queerness of Tchaikovsky's Songs" helped me frame my thoughts on these songs, joining facts to feelings.