

Perceptions of homosexuality in Tchaikovsky criticism

Nigel Smith

Attempts in the last few years to consider the application of issues of sexuality and gender to music criticism have generally not been well received. As part of a more general trend towards a contextual criticism that attempts to dismantle the 'ideology of autonomous music',¹ Susan McClary's readings of music as having sexual and political meaning have in particular attracted strong criticism. McClary attempts in her book *Feminine Endings* and elsewhere to read the 'text' of classical music as being structured by and participating in the shaping of concepts and understandings of gender and sexuality; hence her interpretation of Tchaikovsky's Fourth Symphony as a rewriting of the 'masculine narrative' of sonata form from a gay perspective.² Pieter van der Toorn's article 'Politics, Feminism and Contemporary Music Theory', which appeared in the *Journal of Musicology* in 1991, rejected McClary's interpretation of music as a site upon which issues of gender and sexuality are contested as an unnecessary reduction of the musical experience to a single meaning:

The tension and release patterns of tonal music, the psychological impact of these patterns, can be understood as unrelated or only dimly related to sexual conflict . . . her approach tends to shrink and hamper music's potential.³

Van der Toorn's ideal of listening is avowedly apolitical; music's attraction is located in 'moments of aesthetic rapport, of self-forgetting at-oneness with music'.⁴ While McClary's arguments are at best contentious (she has been attacked for her tendency to conceive of gender and sexual identities as being fixed or essential),⁵ the marauding band of feminists against whom van der Toorn's polemic is directed are not alone in attempting to relate sexuality to music. In his recent four-volume work, *Tchaikovsky: A Biographical and Critical Study*, musicologist David Brown offers the following explanation of Tchaikovsky's music:

It is perhaps above all, through his passionate relationship with his mother that we may perceive

the seeds from which sprang those growths of psychological abnormality which insidiously bound themselves around him, until, unable to channel itself into the closest of personal relationships, that life burst out importunately, and with blazing force, through his music.⁶

Brown's study seeks to explain the perceived faults in Tchaikovsky's music through his homosexuality; thus Tchaikovsky's tone-poem *Francesca da Rimini* is spoilt by 'obsessive repetition of the main theme':

the portrayal of Francesca is flawed, not simply by the overstatement of her theme, but above all by the grossly overblown conclusion that sets forth too brazenly her lovely, long-spun melody . . . Himself beset by feelings of sexual guilt, Tchaikovsky's identification with Francesca's shade become so absolute, so complete, that finally, as it were, her music becomes possessed with something of the agony that besets his own self. His emotion overflows, and the whole canvas is indelibly stained.⁷

A review of the last volume of Brown's work published in the *Times Literary Supplement* in January 1992 suggested that Brown's work is but the most recent instance of a distortion of Tchaikovsky's biography; social prejudice against homosexuality resulted in the myth of Tchaikovsky as the neurotic, lonely and disturbed composer.⁸ The following brief study of Tchaikovsky criticism will attempt to assess the extent to which perceptions of his sexuality have affected the interpretation and evaluation of his music. The importance of such an enterprise is that, given that twentieth-century music aesthetics often seem to consist of an uneasy juxtaposition of nineteenth-century notions of art as an autobiographical utterance and more recent concepts of music as autonomous form, personal prejudice disguised as aesthetic concern can be deeply influential in forming value judgements of musical works. Hence, although McClary and Brown both posit a relation between homosexuality and music, McClary is perceived as an irresponsible radical, while Brown, being the author of the *New Grove* article on Tchaikovsky,

holds the status of a respected musicologist. While it is frequently asserted that art is an autonomous sphere of activity, exempt from conventional morality, representations of Tchaikovsky in the last hundred years show that in cases of personal or cultural prejudice, such a space of aesthetic autonomy has often been denied. My point is not to attempt a reassessment of Tchaikovsky free from all prejudice (assuming such a project is possible), but rather to argue that, given that Van der Toorn's ideal formalistic aesthetic of 'self-forgetting at-oneness' has rarely been a historical reality, and that music historiography has often depended on biographical criticism as a tacit 'explanation sketch', issues of sexuality and gender should be regarded as relevant to the evaluation of debates of music aesthetics and the formation of canons of music history. My study of Tchaikovsky criticism is limited to English and American books and periodicals, partly for reasons of convenience, and partly because the initial lack of biographical information about Tchaikovsky in the English-speaking world makes possible an assessment of the effect that knowledge of his sexuality had on criticism of his music. It should be noted that the reception of Tchaikovsky on the continent followed a rather different pattern, and that the critics I have examined reflect particularly Anglo-Saxon concerns and anxieties.

After the opening of Carnegie Hall in New York in 1891, at which Tchaikovsky was present, it was declared that, 'Since Wagner is dead, there is no question that Tchaikovsky ranks foremost among our living composers'.⁹ In the *Monthly Musical Record* in 1901, Henry Stunt exclaimed that:

It is only a few years since the composer of the Pathetic Symphony died, but his name already ranks among the great masters who are termed Classical.¹⁰

In England and America, where Russian music was regarded as being harsh and strange, Tchaikovsky gained acceptance as a more 'civilised', though still exotic, representative of the East. The particular emotional tone of his music was generally regarded as a function of his nationality; the melancholic strain in his music is ascribed

to his, 'Slavonic instinct, for in his music he is a Slave among Slaves [sic]'.¹¹ He was not, however, regarded as sentimental or indulgent:

Whilst dwelling upon his peculiar brooding melancholy, though, one would particularly wish to make one point absolutely clear, Tchaikovsky was no mere whining sentimentalist. If he expressed the suffering phrases of humanity alone, he at least did so with all the truth and sincerity of an Ecclesiastes.¹²

The 'truth and sincerity' of Tchaikovsky's emotional expression is characterised by Ernest Newman (1902) as having a particularly personal dimension:

although he grew enormously in sheer musical power, he grew still more rapidly in the poetic and dramatic sense of things, finding actual life so important, so pressing, so clamant, that it interpenetrated almost all his thoughts on music.¹³

In the context of the Romantic aesthetic of the artist as inspired poet, the voice of humanity, the personal feeling that provided the impetus for Tchaikovsky's inspiration is nevertheless expressed in terms of universal meaning; the suffering expressed in his music transcends the level of the individual. Of the Fifth Symphony, Edwin Evans (1907) stated that:

It is like an eloquent sermon in which every man traces the allusion to his own shortcomings, and in which he seems to hear the expression of his secret thoughts.¹⁴

Tchaikovsky was regarded as being guided more by inspiration and an intuitive grasp of the human condition than by intellectual or structural concerns; Newman's praise for Tchaikovsky's symphonies was based more on their psychological unity and coherence than on their structural qualities.

The incredible popularity of Tchaikovsky's music in the years after his death coincided with a fascination with his character, presumably caused by the rumours of his sexuality and supposed suicide, a myth which, although lacking in any supporting evidence, nevertheless received wide circulation. The interest in Tchaikovsky seems

partly due to the lack of information available in English in the first few decades of the century, and partly to the enigmatic nature of those features that were known, such as his disastrous marriage to Antoninya Milyukova, and his strange relationship by letter with his benefactress, Nadezhda von Meck. His brother Modeste's biography, published in Rosa Newmarch's translation in 1906 and based upon the von Meck correspondence, is careful to exclude any mention of Tchaikovsky's homosexuality, and in general only served to heighten speculation. The secrecy surrounding Tchaikovsky's life no doubt encouraged rumours of his homosexuality, which seem to have circulated widely, though it was not confirmed in print as fact until 1937 in the literary biography *Beloved Friend*,¹⁵ which drew on the uncensored correspondence published in Russian in 1934-36 before being quickly suppressed by the Soviet authorities. Implications of his homosexuality nevertheless quickly became associated with an image of Tchaikovsky as a torturously self-absorbed, introverted and suffering soul, despite any clear evidence to suggest that this was the case. Rather, the lack of information seems to have encouraged a certain freedom of interpretation. A. E. Keeton's description in 1900 is of a relatively benign, if somewhat reticent figure of 'singularly aristocratic bearing':

A man of the simplest habits, ceaselessly laborious and painstaking, scrupulously punctual in his engagements, he nevertheless shunned society, becoming more and more silent as life advanced. But he was no bitter, self-absorbed misanthrope: could he be of any use to his fellow man, he immediately came out of his shell, and he was kindness and good nature itself in helping on young beginners.¹⁶

However, James Huneker, in his *Mezzotints in Modern Music* (1910) describes Tchaikovsky's personality in rather different terms:

Clouded by an unfortunate and undoubtedly psychopathic temperament, he suffered greatly and shunned publicity, and was denied even the joys and comforts of a happy home. He died of cholera, but grave rumours circulated in St Petersburg on the day of his funeral; rumours that have never been quite proved false, and his sixth and last symphony is called by some the

suicide symphony. A complete breakdown resulted in 1877, and his entire existence was clouded by some secret sorrow, the origin of which we can dimly surmise, but need not investigate.¹⁷

The tendency to regard Tchaikovsky as a case study of mental illness is apparent in an article by Charles Buchanan in the *Musical Quarterly* published in 1919:

In the light of modern investigation we see Tchaikovsky for a clearly marked case of psychasthenia, and in remarking this fact one is merely recording a scientific phenomenon.¹⁸

What was previously speculation has been naturalised into scientific fact, this despite the fact that, '... we know little more to-day of the secret interiors of his life than we knew a quarter of a century ago'.¹⁹ The various diagnoses of mental disorder provided by Buchanan and Huneker are by implication a product of his homosexuality: Buchanan states that, '... the notion has circulated to the effect that Tchaikovsky's distress was intensified by certain morbid perversities and idiosyncrasies of a sexual nature'.²⁰ For Huneker, this is revealed in Tchaikovsky's music:

There is no need of further delving into the pathology of this case, which bears all the hallmarks familiar to specialists in nervous diseases, but it is well to keep the fact in view, because of its important bearing on the music, some of which is truly pathological.²¹

The Sixth Symphony was generally regarded as providing the best example of the disease of homosexuality; 'the sixth symphony remains his expression of that helpless, dreadful thing we so futilely call hypochondria':

It is one man's individual experience, an experience which, if it had been expressed through the medium of human speech, would have revealed its author as an abject creature crouching beneath the unappeasable winds and havocs of chronic hysteria.²²

Havelock Ellis, a nineteenth century English 'sexologist', apparently referred to the Sixth Symphony as the 'homosexual tragedy symphony',²³ and, as quoted above, Huneker refers to

the Sixth Symphony as the 'suicide symphony'. The Pathétique's unusual form, with the usual allegro finale being replaced by a slow movement which dies out in a despairing conclusion to the work, was obviously regarded as being a depiction of Tchaikovsky's own tragedy. In the context of Tchaikovsky's homosexuality, his music no longer expresses the 'suffering phrases of humanity', but is rather 'one man's individual experience', a depiction of psychological inner torment.

While Tchaikovsky's music became and remained a staple of the concert repertoire, it is obvious that by the 1920s Tchaikovsky had fallen into disfavour in serious musical circles. In an article in *Gramophone* in 1928, Richard Holt stated that, 'To the intellectuals of music, he is, of course, anathema'.²⁴ While this can be explained partly in terms of changing musical taste and a certain anti-populist elitism, the attack on Tchaikovsky's romantic excess was couched in terms of his personal degeneracy. Eric Blom, in his book *Tchaikovsky's Orchestral Works*, published in 1927, suggests that Tchaikovsky's music fails to be of universal appeal because its expression derives from personal suffering that is 'physical' (that is, sexual) in origin:

What is wrong with it [the Fourth Symphony] is a matter not of kind, but of degree; it is not the product of a soul shaken to its depths, but only of a pathological state, a nerve crisis. All that militates against its being positively great is the fact that suffering which is in its essence largely physical has no chance of making a universal appeal. Great agonies of the heart, the strife and stress of an intellect, expressed in terms of art find their echo in mankind at large because they are, like art itself, removed from the material plane; physical pain, even in its mental results, is too personally confined to win more than sympathy.²⁵

Moreover, it is a sympathy 'tempered with distaste'.

Rather than continue to document the ways in which Tchaikovsky's music has been interpreted in terms of his sexuality, it seems important at this point to try and explain exactly why homosexuality has been such a prominent concern in Tchaikovsky's critical history. In recent times he has come to stand as the archetypal gay composer, an identity which has become firmly entrenched in

the popular imagination. An episode of *Monty Python's Flying Circus* broadcast in 1972 expresses in a crude form the basic dilemma which writers on Tchaikovsky have felt compelled to address:

Tchaikovsky. Was he the tortured soul who poured out his immortal longings into dignified passages of stately music, or was he just an old poof who wrote tunes?²⁶

It is arguable that the fascination exerted by the mysteries of Tchaikovsky's life at the turn of the century intersected with a great deal of activity in attempts to redefine homosexuality in terms of medical disciplines, psychology and psychiatry in particular. Prior to the nineteenth century, sexuality had primarily been an issue for ethics and philosophy. Individual sexual acts served as the focus for regulation as being either immoral or proper; homosexuality as an *identity* did not exist as a concept. The division of the domain of sexuality into two distinct sexual identities, heterosexual and homosexual, is generally accepted as having taken place during the nineteenth century; the hybrid terms were not coined until the 1870s.²⁷ Michel Foucault, in his *History of Sexuality*, marks this as a fundamental change in the history of sexuality; whereas previously what had been proscribed had been a form of behaviour, the act of sodomy, the nineteenth century created virtually a new species, the Homosexual:

As defined by the ancient civil or canonical codes, sodomy was a category of forbidden acts; their perpetrator was nothing more than the juridical subject of them. The nineteenth century homosexual became a personage, a past, a case history, and a childhood, an addition to being a type of life, a life form, and a morphology, with an indiscrete anatomy and possibly a mysterious physiology.²⁸

This new notion of homosexuality was one of an identity which pervaded every aspect of an individual's life:

Nothing that went into his total composition was unaffected by his sexuality. It was everywhere present in him, at the root of all his actions because it was their insidious and indefinitely active principle; written immodestly on his face

and body because it was a secret that always gave itself away.²⁹

Within the context of turn-of-the-century constructions of homosexuality, the way in which Tchaikovsky was viewed reflects as much on contemporary attitudes and opinions as it does on Tchaikovsky himself. That the image of Tchaikovsky which gradually built up was more a product of contemporary concerns than an accurate image of the man is evident in the way in which the picture of Tchaikovsky's personality shifted from being that of a shy and retiring, yet warm-hearted man to the image of the neurotic, psychologically disturbed recluse.

Foucault's trope of the 'secret that always gave itself away', the notion that the homosexual is irrevocably marked by his deviant sexuality, is revealed in the way Tchaikovsky is perceived as duplicitous, leading a double life. Early accounts of the sincerity and veracity of Tchaikovsky's music become displaced by perceptions of falsehood and insincerity in the context of his homosexuality, both in his private life and as revealed in his music. Edward Lockspeiser, in his article, 'Tchaikovsky the Man', describes, as an image of Tchaikovsky's divided self, a number of photos, some depicting, 'a benign old gentleman, with snow-white hair, full features, not especially striking in his appearance'.³⁰ However, Lockspeiser does not regard any of these photos as presenting a true picture of the man as supposedly judged from his music or his letters. It is only in a photograph taken at the age of 39, two years after his marriage, that the real Tchaikovsky emerges:

There is nothing idealised in this picture. The knit brow, the agonised stare, the heavy, despondent expression give for the first time a glimpse of the man in mental torture.³¹

This split in Tchaikovsky's identity is a necessary consequence of his 'forked sexuality condemning him to subterfuge and duplicity, though at the same time he presents a picture of the perfect gentleman'.³² Gerald Abraham makes a distinction between the 'outward man' and the 'real man', the urbane facade and the neurotic, depraved interior:

the contrast between the outward man seen by

his acquaintances (the pleasant companion, somewhat shy, but still a man of the world) and the real man (the neurotic, the secret drinker) ... it is hardly too much to say that his whole outward life was one colossal lie, a facade carefully built up and desperately preserved, to give the world a certain impression and conceal his true nature; it was flawed by a tragic physical tendency which modern society considers extremely shameful, if not absolutely criminal.³³

This notion of the false exterior and the true interior is replicated in criticism of Tchaikovsky's music, where it is manifested in the degree to which his emotional expression is perceived as being sincere or overblown. Like Abraham's distinction between the 'outward man' and the 'real man', Westrup sees Tchaikovsky in terms of a divided self, and it is only in the Sixth Symphony that the 'true' Tchaikovsky is revealed:

Like all morbid and introspective people, he was not content with hypochondria. He had to make a pose of his misery. He could not be himself.... He wanted the world to believe in his misfortunes and to be impressed by them and so he forced the note and struck attitudes—tremendous attitudes blazoned aloud by trombones and trumpets. But in the finale of his last symphony the mask dropped off, and the real tragedy of his life was written so plainly and directly that hardly anyone could fail to understand it. The pitiful incompleteness of Tchaikovsky's emotional system and of his whole life is laid bare.³⁴

Hugh Ottoway, in the *Musical Opinion* in 1956, claims that it is demonstrable 'in objective terms' that the last three symphonies reveal, 'the composer's progress in coping symphonically with his own temperamental sickness'. The triumphant E major finale of the Fifth Symphony is described as, 'mawkishly theatrical':

In the finale of the Fifth he tried to take the vital step to overcome distress in a big affirmative movement... the result alas is only superficially impressive: the apotheosis of the motto theme sounds contrived and histrionic, as indeed it was bound to do.³⁵

By contrast, the 'Tchaikovsky "situation" which lies at the heart of the last three symphonies is revealed in the Pathétique at a more profound and impressive level'. John Warrack, in the BBC

guide to *Tchaikovsky Symphonies and Concertos*, comes to a similar conclusion: the finale of the Fifth Symphony is judged unconvincing and hollow, contradicting the overall mood of the work; again, it is the Sixth Symphony which is the more truthful:

There is a unity in his last symphony which is more truthful: that he really has at last acknowledged the truth of his condition, the tragedy of a passionate and tender nature doomed to frustration and guilt. However bitter the triumph, he produced out of it his greatest symphony.³⁶

The concept of homosexuality as an abnormality or disease produces an image of Tchaikovsky as a 'self-deceiving, self-torturing personality' and hence it is not surprising that the passive acceptance of social condemnation as supposedly shown in the *Pathétique* is found to be more convincing than the Fifth Symphony's defiant gestures of affirmation.

The movement from earlier judgements of Tchaikovsky's veracity and sincerity to the later perceptions of falseness and insincerity is mirrored in the way that interpretation shifts in terms of the binaries universal/personal, objective/subjective and restraint/excess. This last pair is perhaps best illustrated in terms of Tchaikovsky's use of repetition as a means of structural organisation. Edwin Evans in 1907 found this to be one of Tchaikovsky's greatest achievements:

[It is] one of his greatest merits to confer such inherence upon his repetitions as to render them compulsory for the completion of the musical sentence. It is doubtful if any other composer has been so sensible of this important means of expression.³⁷

The later, opposing view is that of repetition as hysterically excessive; hence Westrup's complaint that,

the theme is hurled at the listener over and over again regardless: slab upon slab of the same tune until common self protests against such a pagoda of melody.³⁸

The same theme occurs in Paul Henry Lang's *Music in Western Civilization* (1941). The Fourth Symphony is judged 'antisymphonic',

there is no trace of development in the symphonic sense, but merely a succession of repetitions and a sequence of climactic runs that often becomes hysterical.³⁹

David Brown's opinion that *Francesca da Rimini* is spoilt by 'obsessive repetition' is probably the most blatant version of the concept of homosexuality as 'the secret that always gives itself away'. Given that homosexuality is generally no longer equated with immorality, it may seem easy enough to discount David Brown's overt distaste for the subject of his biography as an isolated instance. What are less easy to set aside, however, are the received critical attitudes formed earlier this century. Dismissals of Tchaikovsky's music as bombastic, lightweight and lacking in formal rigour are still commonplace, and these attitudes are at least partly derived from the earlier connection between the 'disease of homosexuality' and Tchaikovsky's music.

NOTES

¹ Richard Leppert and Susan McClary, eds, *Music and Society* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987).

² Susan McClary, *Feminine Endings* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991), pp. 69-79. See also 'Schubert's Sexuality and his Music', *Gay and Lesbian Study Group Newsletter* (AMS) 2.1 (1992), pp. 8-14.

³ Pieter van der Toom, 'Politics, Feminism and Contemporary Music', *Journal of Musicology* 10 (1991), p. 291.

⁴ Van der Toom, 'Politics, Feminism,' p. 276.

⁵ See David Schiff, 'The Bounds of Music: The Strange New Direction of Musical Criticism', *New Republic* 3 February 1992, p. 32.

⁶ David Brown, *The Early Years (1840-1874)*, vol. 1 of *Tchaikovsky: A Biographical and Critical Study* (London: Victor Gollancz, 1978-1991), p. 50.

⁷ David Brown, *The Crisis Years (1874-1878)*, vol. 2 of *Tchaikovsky: A Biographical and Critical Study*, p. 116.

⁸ Simon Karlinsky, 'The Retrieval of the True Tchaikovsky', *Times Literary Supplement*, 17 January 1992, pp. 20-21.

⁹ Quoted in Richard Taruskin, 'Tchaikovsky: Fallen From Grace', *New York Times*, 30 June 1991, p. 21.

¹⁰ Henry Stunt, 'Tchaikovsky', *Musical Standard* 16 (20 July 1901), p. 37.

¹¹ Robin Legge, 'Peter Tschaikowsky: A Sketch', *Musical Opinion* 1 January 1894, p. 234.

¹² A. E. Keeton, 'Peter Ilytch Tschaikowski', *Contemporary Review* 78 (July 1900), p. 78.

¹³ Ernest Newman, 'Tchaikovsky and the Symphony', *Monthly Musical Review* 32 (September 1902), p. 163.

¹⁴ Edwin Evans, 'Tchaikovsky Analyses: 3. Symphony no. 6 in B minor, op. 74 ("The Pathetic")', *Musical Standard* 28

(September 1907), p. 197.

¹⁵ Catherine Bowen and Barbara von Meck, *Beloved Friend: The Story of Tchaikovsky and Nadejda von Meck* (London: Hutchinson, 1937).

¹⁶ Keeton, 'Tschaikovski', p. 75.

¹⁷ James Huneker, *Mezzotints in Modern Music* (New York: Charles Scribner, 1910), p. 86.

¹⁸ Charles Buchanan, 'The Unvanquishable Tchaikovsky', *Musical Quarterly* 5 (July 1919), p. 368.

¹⁹ Buchanan, 'The Unvanquishable', p. 368.

²⁰ Buchanan, 'The Unvanquishable', p. 368.

²¹ Huneker, *Mezzotints*, p. 90.

²² Buchanan, 'The Unvanquishable', p. 370.

²³ Quoted in Simon Karlinsky, 'Tchaikovsky', unpublished lecture at University of California, Berkeley, 1991.

²⁴ Richard Holt, 'Tchaikovsky and the Gramophone', *Gramophone* 6 August 1928, p. 94.

²⁵ Eric Blom, *Tchaikovsky's Orchestral Works* (London: Oxford University Press, 1927), pp. 26-27.

²⁶ Graham Chapman et al., *Monty Python's Flying Circus* (London, 1989; London: Mandarin, 1990), II, p. 66.

²⁷ Foucault suggests that Carl Westphal's *Archiv für Neurologie* (1870) is the possible origin of the term homo-

sexuality as a medical concept. See Michel Foucault, *History of Sexuality* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1976), I, p. 43.

²⁸ Foucault, *History of Sexuality*, p. 43.

²⁹ Foucault, *History of Sexuality*, p. 43.

³⁰ Lockspeiser, Edward, 'Tchaikovsky the Man', in *Tchaikovsky: A Symposium* (London: Lindsay Drummond, 1945), p. 9.

³¹ Lockspeiser, 'Tchaikovsky the Man', p. 9.

³² Lockspeiser, 'Tchaikovsky the Man', p. 21.

³³ Gerald Abraham, 'The Riddle of Tchaikovsky', *Monthly Musical Record* 67 (July-August 1937), p. 129.

³⁴ J. A. Westrup, 'Tchaikovsky and the Symphony', *Musical Times* 81 (1940), p. 251.

³⁵ Hugh Ottoway, 'Some Reflections on Tchaikovsky's Sixth Symphony', *Musical Opinion* 80 (October 1956), p. 15.

³⁶ John Warrack, *Tchaikovsky Symphonies and Concertos* (London: BBC, 1969), p. 38.

³⁷ Evans, 'Tchaikovsky Analyses', p. 197.

³⁸ Westrup, 'Tchaikovsky and the Symphony', p. 251.

³⁹ Paul Henry Lang, *Music in Western Civilization* (New York: Norton, 1941), p. 949.