



Tchaikovsky's Last Three Symphonies and Sexism

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Abstract. Tchaikovsky's symphonic works enjoy a pivotal position in symphonic poetry. Not only influenced by Western musicians such as Schumann and Debussy in the same period, his compositions also incorporate the unique stylistic characteristics of the Russian nation. As one of the great Russian composers, Tchaikovsky's compositions have inherited the past and opened up the future in the history of art. For him, however, his sexism and destiny are inextricably linked to his works. Available studies have drawn so much attention to his sexism that the influence of social context and religious culture on the composer's own emotional expression has been overlooked. This thesis discusses whether there is sexism in Tchaikovsky's work and the expression of emotion in his symphonies through a study of social and cultural background, major historical events, and a stylistic analysis of the last three symphonies.

Keywords: Tchaikovsky, the last three symphonies, sexism, theme of fate, Orthodoxy

1 Introduction

Tchaikovsky is internationally renowned and popular. Most scholars consider his works to be full of contradictory conflicts and dramatic tensions as well as national and romantic fantasies. But why was Tchaikovsky, one of the most important Russian composers, excluded from the "New Russian School"? It is not only due to the Western Europeanization of his works, but also his own ambiguous gender orientation. Although Tchaikovsky was on the periphery of Romanticism, he was far more influenced by Western European music than by "The Five". From the time Tchaikovsky chose the Petersburg Conservatory over France for his study, he was destined to take a very different path from the explicitly Russian style of "The Five". He wrote on a wider range of subjects than "The Five", drew more on the forms and techniques of Western European Romanticism, and leaned more towards the compositional style of the Western European Academy. Tchaikovsky himself was deeply influenced by the compositional techniques of Beethoven, Haydn and others of the post-classical period. Tchaikovsky's music not only implies reflections on the social conditions of the time but also contains his own blocked emotions, delivering a profound tragic and realistic power. There are two international speculations about the cause of Tchaikovsky's death: one is that he died of cholera caused by drinking raw water, but a considerable number of scholars

believe that Tchaikovsky committed suicide by taking poison due to the exposure of his homosexuality^[1]. The controversy over Tchaikovsky's death is now also contested by two different kinds of revisionists (Poznansky, Rutarsky, etc.) and traditional theoretical scholars (Orlova Holden, etc.). Suzanne Daman argues that Tchaikovsky's sexism as well as his emotional catharsis are shown in his works and serve as an autobiography as well as a spiritual confession for the composition of the symphony^[2]. In contrast, the BBC documentary *Discovery Tchaikovsky* believes that Tchaikovsky's Symphony No. 6 is a work of love dedicated to his nephew^[3]. The former view is more convincing based on the available literature. Tchaikovsky's sexual orientation was rooted in his anguished heart, which is also evident in his works. Besides, his melancholic thoughts are a slight hint of his unusual sexual orientation, thus his struggle against fate may be related to his unhappiness in love and life. The present study does not clearly point out the overall embodiment of Tchaikovsky's sexism in his last three symphonies, so the main purpose of this thesis is to investigate the connection between Tchaikovsky's sexism and his last three symphonies as well as the embodiment of his emotions in the last three symphonies.

2 Life and Social Background

During his study at the Petersburg Law School, Tchaikovsky not only became familiar with operas and symphonies by Russian and foreign composers, but also took piano and choral lessons after school. It is worth mentioning that Tchaikovsky had a great interest in Glinka's musical works. While teaching at the Moscow Conservatory, Tchaikovsky formed a close relationship with the "The Five", during which Tchaikovsky's works were mostly based on folk songs. On this basis, he developed a musical language rich in Russian national character.

It is worth emphasizing that in 1876 Tchaikovsky began to correspond with the rich Russian widow Mrs. Meck who gave Tchaikovsky great moral as well as financial support, enabling him to get rid of teaching at the Moscow Conservatory. Tchaikovsky also wrote thousands of letters to Mrs. Meck during this period to give vent to his feelings. Tchaikovsky always regarded women as equal partners and treated them with a platonic relationship [4]. This is evident in his dealings with Madame Merk, who sponsored him for more than ten years but never met him in person. The only woman whose intimacy was certified by Tchaikovsky's close friends was named Desirée Aalto, a famous female singer, but Tchaikovsky also described it in his correspondence with his friends as mere admiration for her talent^[4]. During the three years of the composition of *Evgeny Onegin*, Tchaikovsky also had the only marriage in his life. According to his letters, he was completely occupied with the opera^[5], but he had always been eager to start his own family, believing that the highest ideal of a happy and fulfilling life was to have a family. He also expressed his view of marriage in *Swan Lake*, leveraging the female protagonist, Ojeta's lament to Siegfried in the second act to express that only marriage can lead to rebirth from the sufferings of life.

Although Tchaikovsky revealed his desire for marriage, he decided to separate from his wife after only two months of marriage. Based on the social context of the time,

marriage was considered a religious sacrament, thus divorce cases were handled by the religious authorities. Regardless of scarce statistics of divorce in Russia and relatively rare divorces, Tchaikovsky was determined to divorce his wife in such a traditional family. In Kashkin's Memoirs, Tchaikovsky's correspondence with him was quoted, "Tchaikovsky considered his wife Milyukova incompatible with his life and that he had no desire to respond to his wife's affection". In the investigation report presented by the famous Soviet musicologist Alexandra Orlova, it was confirmed that Tchaikovsky's death was a forced suicide caused by the exposure of his homosexuality.

Central Europe, as well as Northern Europe, has long been unfriendly to those with non-traditional sexual orientations. Article 995 of the Russian Imperial Criminal Code (St. Petersburg 1878 and 1885) explicitly stated that homosexuals are stripped of their citizenship and exiled to Siberia. The Orthodox Church further considered homosexual tendencies as a disorder and disease, and homosexual behavior as sinful and destructive [6]. In Nicholas Spina's "Orthodox Religious Authority and the Forgiveness of Homosexuality" it is mentioned that in Russia the Orthodox Church successfully combined Christianity closely with the rejection of homosexuality and implied that their own congregation was against LGBT [7] insisting that the prevalence of homosexuality would affect the reputation of their church. During the Tsarist era, Orthodoxy was more closely aligned with imperial power. As a result, such doctrine in the social context of the time was undoubtedly a sharp blade hanging over Tchaikovsky. During the Soviet period, Orthodox theology even treated homosexuals as a provocation to the dignity of a human-being in the doctrine [8]. Those who supported homosexuality were even defined as (potentially) destructive and murderous. Homosexuality itself was stigmatized, which may be one of the reasons for the endless themes of fate implied in his work and the contradictory oppositions in his repertoire. In addition, from my perspective, the social status quo was a cage he wanted to break through. Artistic genres and styles seemed very passive in the 1860s, when religious journals began to criticize ballet, opera and theater. Secular society went toe-to-toe with the religious church, therefore many of the best works required religious censorship before they could be performed. As technology progressed and people became more knowledgeable, many people questioned and even criticized religion with more and more intellectuals began to advocate "atheism". In Tchaikovsky's autobiography, he mentioned that his beloved country was in its darkest period and that the development of autocracy led to political censorship of his works, causing a gloomy atmosphere throughout Russia. Though dissatisfied with the dark reality of Tsarist rule, overwhelmed with hatred to the dictatorship of the rulers and sympathized with the oppressed people, he was very fearful of the revolutionaries' resistance. Troubled by the social background, he was eager to pursue the truth but failed to find the way out. Such a state of mind was presented through tragic conflicts and recurring themes of fate in his works. In symphonic works, he often pinned on his idealization of real life. However, he fell into the conflict between the theme of fate and the real life in the third and fourth movements.

3 Works

It is due to Tchaikovsky's strong sense of struggle against fate that we can see many related themes in his repertoire. I have chosen Tchaikovsky's famous Fourth, Fifth and Sixth Symphonies for analysis.

The theme of fate can be discovered in the first movement of the Fourth Symphony, which is also closely related to the Fifth and Sixth Symphonies. In his symphonies, themes are often followed by falling notes. Tchaikovsky believes that happiness is always exposed to danger, but the pursuit of happiness is also often hindered by this fate, which is devastating and fatalistic. The theme of fate in the Fifth Symphony is almost devastatingly unconquerable. Tchaikovsky sees himself as completely resigned to fate and expresses his answer in the bass voice: there is no hope. The Sixth Symphony is almost missionary, heralding Tchaikovsky's demise.

What is notable is the symphony's fourth movement, which reveals not only the theme of Tchaikovsky's fate, but also the social background at that time. For the fact that the entire fourth movement adopts iambic pentameter, it does not follow the iambic pentameter ABACA, but ends on B. The whole piece ends abruptly as if the carnival is still in progress, and the emotions of the people are far above Tchaikovsky's personal feelings. In the winter of 1876, Tchaikovsky composed the Slavonic March, which hides Tchaikovsky's strong patriotism which is clearly reflected in Tchaikovsky's symphonies. Although the theme of fate remains, Tchaikovsky paints a picture of a folk festival in the fourth movement, with theme X (sheet music1) a background of reveling crowds alternating with theme Y (sheet music 2) a folk song about birch trees.

Allegro con fuoco

Fig. 1. Tchaikovsky Symphony No. 4, fourth movement (Figure credit: Tchaikovsky Symphony bars 1-5)

11

1. Fl.

2. Fl.

Klar. 1.2 in B

Fag. 1.2

Hrn. 1.2 in F

Viol. I

Vla.

Fig. 2. Tchaikovsky Symphony No. 4, fourth movement (Figure credit: Tchaikovsky Symphon bars 11-15)

199 Andante J. J

Kl. Fl.

1. Fl.

2. Fl.

Ob. 1.2

Klar. 1.2 in B

Fag. 1.2

Fig. 3. Tchaikovsky Symphony No. 4, fourth movement (Figure credit: Tchaikovsky Symphon bars 199-205)

Fig. 4. Tchaikovsky Symphony No. 4, fourth movement (bars 66 -70)

Y (sheet music 1) is in the key of A minor, but the harmonic foundation and bass progression are based on the genitive long tone of F major, and the dense sixteenth note of the b accompaniment echo the festive background of theme X with the cheering people.

The fourth movement's abac quartet is also based on F major, leading up to the real main theme C at the end. In the X section, Music sheet 2, Tchaikovsky sticks to a combination of double tonality with F major as the harmonic background. But actually, the Y theme over it is in A minor. Although Tchaikovsky raises the Y theme in the first interpolation, the chromatic upward movement of the woodwind group from bar 18 is always putting forward questions not yet resolved. This can be attributed to Tchaikovsky's tangled heart. Questions related to him are not resolved, but the tide of enthusiasm overwhelms him so he proceeds to the X theme, which stands in a sharp contrast with the Y theme in color. The F major still dominates the entire fourth movement, but when the desire to express his personal destiny was integrated into the interlude Y1 section, the fourth movement immediately turns into a lonely melancholy B-flat minor, while Y2 is in D minor representing Tchaikovsky's contemplation and ideological aspirations. As the crowd's enthusiasm rises again, he chooses the low brass for the Y theme with the increasingly intense sixteenth note in the upper violin, which leads to the merge of the X and Y theme. When Y theme appears as a fragmentation, the crowd represented by the 16th note in the upper violin alternate with the Y theme. The emotion the composer wants to express has been hidden in the joy among the people. The first two fragmented displays of the theme indicate that the composer is testing himself to see if he can experience the joyful mood with the people. However, judging from the Y theme, but the composer is indulged in depressed mood. He wants to integrated himself into the raving people, but his own tangled thoughts are not relieved but repeatedly appear in the midst of the people's revelry. Then, theme Z shows up, leading to the state of the Polonaise. In the E section, the Y theme gets more complete and more prominent,

while the X theme is played by the thin flute alone. The entire fourth movement is triumphant but soon in the 199 bars (Music sheet 3) the above-mentioned anxiety appears, this shift is more like the fate-theme rhythmic pattern, echoing the fate theme in the first movement. Different from the front horn and bassoon, this time is dominated by trumpet with the intensity notation turning into *fff*. Though the fate theme is powerful, the appearance of the horn fails to resist people's desire for a happy and cheerful life. Instead, it's more similar to their rising up against fate. The whole piece still ends in a festive mood. It can be referred that the theme Z represents the people and the festive mood is also for the people. The composer tries to merge the XY theme for the third time, but the melancholic mood of himself shows that he has not yet been able to fit himself into the ruggedness of the people. This may be related to Tchaikovsky's sexuality, which in the Russian context of the time was always scorned by the church and society. In such a social environment, Tchaikovsky could not find his own belonging. Although it's clear that he has tried to combine himself with the people, covering his sorrow with their happiness to get rid of his inner suffering, he did not manage to put himself on the same footing with them. In my opinion, this is the reason why the XY themes in his repertoire do not blend perfectly.

Tchaikovsky's Fifth Symphony embodies more personal struggle against the theme of fate. The first movement shows the theme of fate similar to funeral march and chant, and the introduction showcases Tchaikovsky's reflection on his suppressed state of mind and fate. Based on his feelings, fate is gray without light. Therefore, the main part is dominated by grave mood stuck in the grip of fate, showing a vague tendency to break through the darkness for brightness. The ending of the first movement is tragic and unresolved. Although the second and third movements show a glimmer of light in life, they are still coerced by the heavy theme of fate. The fourth movement's theme of destiny is merely a scherzo to introduce the later rondo, showing a positive attitude towards life, similar to the fourth movement's popular revelry, but the will of the people triumphs over the misery of the original life. The first three movements of the Fifth Symphony are filled with grave mood, but burdened fate is never Tchaikovsky's only theme. Tchaikovsky puts hope in his music and always gives a triumphal cry for a better life. Compared with the Fourth Symphony, the Fifth presents a relatively positive attitude. In 1888, the Russian intellectuals, due to the high revolutionary situation, produced many works in pursuit of truth and desire for a bright and optimistic atmosphere. The Fifth Symphony is more like a portrait of the inner thoughts of the intellectuals ruled by Russia. The fate of the first three movements is overwhelming, but there is always someone who questions it and then resists it, eventually overcoming the tragic fate through struggle. Also, we can glimpse that Tchaikovsky doesn't have a strong faith in religion based on the manuscript of this symphony, as he writes on the third movement, "Abandon the embrace of religious faith?" This may also be related to his sexual orientation, where homosexuality was rejected by the Church. Regardless of his tangled thoughts, his heart stands with the majority of the people, even facing the hindrance of fate. He has always longed to break through the chains of fate.

In the Fourth and Fifth Symphonies, we can see that Tchaikovsky's personal feelings are fully integrated into the people. It's evident that in the horn representing destiny in the Fourth Symphony, the theme of fate is derived from external factors, but in the Fifth

Symphony it is completely presented in terms of his personal thoughts. In his article, Timothy Jackson refers to Tchaikovsky's Sixth Symphony as "a desperate narrative of homosexuals" [9]. However, it is too one-sided to attribute it exclusively to Tchaikovsky's personal sexuality. Thus, the Sixth Symphony cannot be called a fully homosexual narrative. Tchaikovsky's subjective ideas continued to see his work as connected to his own life and the destiny of his country. The theme of fate represents a kind of reverse role in his music. The grave theme of fate is destined to oppress the people as well as himself. On this basis, it seems that his irrepressible homosexuality must also have been implied in the personal feelings of the work, suffering from oppression imposed by religion and imperial politics. Before the composition of the Sixth Symphony, the prestige of the Russian Tsar had been strengthened by Alexander III while the revolution of social thought was on the verge of burst. The political and social aspects in Russia were in an extremely awkward condition, in which the intellectuals were at a very passive status. However, the intellectuals began to set up some social organizations as the privileges of the nobility were opposed by all classes due to reforms after the mid-19th century. Different groups of intellectuals held opposition to the government to varying degrees.^[10] The Sixth Symphony is not only a masterpiece, but also represents the inner reflection of the intellectuals in general in the context of Russian society at that time. Russian cultural groups were influenced by the European Enlightenment and their main goal was to achieve true freedom. Their ideological differences lay in "monarchy, Orthodoxy and peoplehood". Professor Chicherin's "Science and Religion", published in 1879, signaled the debate on "reason and faith", which the Orthodox Church regarded as heresy and began to crack down people's ideas in all cultural areas.^[10]

The entire fourth movement, although it has only one theme, introduces the listener to the unavoidable question of the coming of death. It is something that every human being can do nothing but accept. The violin's lamentation fills this movement. Whenever the tempo shifts and the brass brings a hint of change, the heavy, lamenting theme emerges with great poignancy and pain. Tchaikovsky regards music as a means of expressing emotion. The fourth movement of the first two works adopts a very cheerful rhythm, even if Tchaikovsky himself fails to blend into the joyful mood of the people, representing hope and joy. In the Sixth Symphony we can only capture the endless grief of Tchaikovsky with the whole sub-part representing his thoughts on death, a matter for contemplation and great sorrow.

4 Conclusion

Through the analysis of Tchaikovsky's life, the Russian social background and the influence of the Orthodox Church on the whole society, this thesis concludes that Tchaikovsky's compositions are profoundly influenced by the social and cultural elements of Russia at that time. In the Fourth, Fifth and Sixth Symphonies, the change of the theme of fate shows the shift of Tchaikovsky's mentality and the transformation of his compositions. Based on literature review of the social background and the change of his mentality, it is found that Tchaikovsky's own sexism is reflected in the music but does

not cover the whole piece. Although the theme serves as an expression of the composer's emotions, the general direction is certainly dependent on the social environment and the background of the times. Even if Tchaikovsky shows his fragile and unacceptable side as a sexist in his symphonies, it is only a reflection and a sigh of relief for himself based on the people. It is not only the sexist Tchaikovsky who is oppressed, but also the general public due to the historical background and religion. Given his higher education, Tchaikovsky develops a sense of commitment to the world. Although he initially seeks for political and religious reform, he chooses to stand with the people with personal experience. As a sexual minority, Tchaikovsky has not used sexist criticism as the only source of creation, but combined many factors to create the thematic motives and emotional expressions in his works. This thesis discusses Tchaikovsky's sexism and his last three works to demonstrate the relationship between his sexism and his creativity. The thesis is written not only to explore Tchaikovsky's sexism, but also to analyze the characteristics of Tchaikovsky's compositions through the social context, taking into account the social, political and religious factors that arise in a particular period. This thesis is still insufficient in its analysis of the compositions. Besides, due to the limited space, it is not possible to analyze all the technical details of the three symphonies respectively, thus only sorting out the key movements and specific historical events for detailed analysis.

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