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(Thomas Kohlhase, translated by J. Bradford Robinson)

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The eternal themes of life and death in Tchaikovsky's late symphonic works

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Tranlated by J. Bradford Robinson

Let me begin on a personal note. Last March Tchaikovsky's Dutch biographer Elisabeth Riethof passed away. Those of us who had the good fortune to know Elisabeth and to be her friend were transfixed by her unusual and generous personality and by her passion for music, especially the music of Tchaikovsky. I would like to dedicate this brief talk to her memory.

Wagner and Tchaikovsky

A cursory glance at the program of today's final concert almost tempts me to place my introductory talk under the heading of "Wagner and Tchaikovsky." On closer inspection, though, this would be an infelicitous and ultimately pointless decision. Besides, it would be completely lopsided. Unlike Liszt, for example, we have no idea whether Wagner took notice of Tchaikovsky at all. And Tchaikovsky? True, he showed interest in Wagner time and again and even expressed his views on him. In 1876 he attended the first complete performance of the Ring in Bayreuth (and reviewed it for a Moscow newspaper), and he is known to have heard other Wagner music dramas and even to have studied Parsifal in vocal score. But no matter how keen his awareness of Wagner's "huge creative powers" and extraordinary genius, no matter how unstinting his praise of Wagner the symphonic composer as revealed precisely in the music dramas, the richness of his harmony, and his skill in orchestration, he had no understanding whatsoever for, and roundly rejected, Wagner the musical dramatist. A Berlin performance of Tristan und Isolde in 1883 left him simply bored. Among other things, he accused Wagner of neglecting the crucial element of all opera: vocal melody. This is plain to see, he claimed, in the mere fact that Wagner's concerts in Moscow and St. Petersburg in 1863 featured the final scene of Tristan – the so-called "Liebestod" – "as a purely instrumental item without the stage figures" or their voices.

Both in their art and their aesthetics, Wagner and Tchaikovsky were worlds apart. Yet today's concert will take place under a single theme: the human condition, or, more specifically, the great thematic complex of life, love, and death.

Tchaikovsky the symphonist

Tchaikovsky was one of the most versatile composers of his day. He made original and significant contributions to virtually every musical genre: opera and ballet, symphony and tone-poem, orchestral suite and solo concerto, chamber music and church music, lieder and piano pieces.

His versatility and open-mindedness are particularly evident in his symphonic output. While still a student at St. Petersburg Conservatory he turned toward the modern symphonic genre of programmatic music. At that time he was a composition pupil of Anton Rubinstein, a pianist and composer celebrated throughout the whole of Europe whose teaching moved in the well-trodden paths marked out by Beethoven, Schumann, and Mendelssohn. The young composer's first overture Groza ("The Storm"), based on a

gloomy play by the then leading Russian playwright Alexander Ostrovsky, is a significant initial contribution to the symphonic poem. This genre had emerged as a viable entity alongside the traditional symphony around the middle of the nineteenth century, above all in the single-movement programmatic works of Franz Liszt. Using novel devices of harmony and instrumentation, a special form of leitmotif technique, and an all-pervasive and constantly varied motivic texture, symphonic poems adopted descriptive and synaesthetic procedures and incorporated "extra-musical" topics and subject-matter in their formal design.

From the outset of his career, Tchaikovsky remained aloof from all currents or "schools." On the one hand, he stands in the tradition of the post-Beethovenian symphony as cultivated by Schumann and Mendelssohn. His first three symphonies of 1866 to 1875, notwithstanding their decidedly national flavor in material, character, and poetic stance, are "pure" absolute music. On the other hand, he took inspiration from the great works of world literature in his symphonic poems – *The Storm*, *Romeo and Juliet*, *The Tempest*, *Francesca da Rimini*, *Manfred*, *Hamlet*, and *Voevoda* – in order to write modernist "programmatic music." Yet we would be hard pressed to call his late symphonies either "absolute" or "programmatic" in the conventional sense of these terms. Nor are his symphonic poems "programmatic music" in the sense that they follow specific expressive contents or outline fully articulated "programs." Their very titles – "Overture," "Symphonic Fantasy," "Fantasy Overture" – signify as much.

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Hamlet

Even the "fantasy overture" *Hamlet*, the first work in this festival's final concert, lacks a program – a circumstance criticized by several reviewers of the première. This work, composed in 1888 immediately after the Fifth Symphony and dedicated to Edvard Grieg, cannot possibly have a fully elaborated program, that is, a sort of listener's guide to its contents. This same is equally inconceivable for Tchaikovsky's other "fantasy overture," *Romeo and Juliet*. Obviously Tchaikovsky was not concerned with retelling the plot of the play. His concern was to capture what he considered its dramatic essence using nothing but musico-poetic means. In the case of *Hamlet*, the focus naturally fell on an explication of the complex eponymous hero, who has challenged the imagination of his interpreters in every branch of art and scholarship as has no other figure from Shakespeare's cosmos.

To be sure, Tchaikovsky's *Hamlet* contains specific references to scenes in the tragedy: the twelve eerie strokes of the bell from the muted horns, say, or the brutal hammerblows of the tutti orchestra in the final section of the introduction. Both evoke the midnight scene in which the ghost of Hamlet's father appears and Hamlet swears his oath of revenge. Another example is the short march in the concluding thematic group of the overture (both in the exposition and the recapitulation), whose subtle instrumentation makes it sound as if off-stage. This march unmistakably alludes to the brilliant and warlike Norwegian prince Fortinbras, who will succeed to the empty throne of Denmark at Hamlet's death. In the play, Hamlet merely glimpses him marching by in the distance. A final example is the funereal coda (a topos for Hamlet's death) that enters after an elegiac cello recitative and restates the Hamlet motif from the introduction.

That said, when we consider the form and overall proportions of the overture, these are marginal occurrences which, no matter how vivid, cannot distract from the essence of the piece. Tchaikovsky focuses entirely on the Hamlet of the pensive monologues and mental conflicts – the hesitant and melancholy Hamlet, brilliant in his sarcasm and cynicism, unyielding in his rejection of the woman he loves and who loves him, the Hamlet who conceals his clear-headed view of the world behind a mask of madness. Evidently Tchaikovsky views this Hamlet as a second Manfred. It is striking how Hamlet's portrait and musical theme in the introduction to the overture resemble the image and theme that Tchaikovsky had painted three years previously in his Manfred Symphony after Lord Byron. Yet the principal theme of the Hamlet Overture shows the other Hamlet, inflamed by the savage and murderous fury of revenge and annihilation.

As so often in his symphonic poems, Tchaikovsky grants himself every licence in the formal design. Nonetheless, Hamlet preserves the basic outline of sonata-allegro form, merely omitting a conventional development section in the middle of the movement in order to unite the contrasting material. It is not until after the recapitulation of the second theme, before the concluding theme, stretta and coda, that motifs from the first movement are juxtaposed with the Hamlet motif from the introduction. Still, development-like passages can be heard at the end of the first theme in both the exposition and the recapitulation. Particularly unusual are the generally harsh chromatic harmonies and the range of keys within the F-minor tonic. For example, the bipartite second theme in the exposition is in the key of the tritone, B minor, and its parallel major, D major, whereas the recapitulation chooses the equally "irregular" keys of B-flat minor and D-flat major. What is especially unusual, however, is the incredibly rich spectrum of Tchaikovsky's instrumentation with its gloomy nuances of timbre, especially in the woodwind. Let me point out only one coloristic and expressive detail in the delicate, motivically circular first section of the secondary thematic group, obviously a symbol of the pure, touching, and loving figure of Ophelia. When this theme is recapitulated it is masked in syncopated chromatic figures in the strings – a profound likeness of Ophelia in her mental derangement.

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Subjective and objective inspiration.
Fourth and Fifth Symphonies

From the Fourth Symphony on, Tchaikovsky no longer made a distinction between "absolute" and "programmatic" music. Absolute music no longer existed for him; he rejected music that was nothing more than an "empty play of notes." While composing his Sixth Symphony, he wrote a letter to his beloved nephew Vladimir Davydov (to whom he wanted to dedicate the work) recalling a symphony he had written only a few months earlier but summarily withdrawn. This symphony in E-flat major was later reconstructed and is even occasionally performed under the erroneous title of "Seventh Symphony." Tchaikovsky would have been horrified if he could have foreseen this, for he considered the work to be a failed symphony "with no genuine inspiration."

If Tchaikovsky thus made no distinction between music with or without a "program," he indeed distinguished between inspired and uninspired music. He also distinguished between two types of inspiration: objective and subjective. In this light, he claimed, music

may have an intrinsic or an extrinsic program, but if it is good music it will always have a program – or, to put it another way, expressive contents. Later Gustav Mahler said much the same thing when he proclaimed that "beginning with Beethoven, there is no modern music that does not have an intrinsic program."

Roughly one year after completing his Fourth Symphony, on 17 December 1878, Tchaikovsky wrote a letter to his patroness and confidante Nadezhda von Meck, explaining what he meant by the distinction between "subjective" and "objective":

With the first [subjective inspiration] he [the composer] expresses in his music his feelings, of joy, of suffering, in a word, like the lyric poet, he pours out, one might say, his own soul. In this instance a programme is not only unnecessary but impossible. But it is another matter [in the case of objective inspiration] when the musician reads a work of poetry or is struck by a scene from nature, and wants to express in musical form that subject which set alight his inspiration. A programme is essential here.

Admittedly Tchaikovsky did not want the expressive contents of his subjectively inspired later symphonies, the Fourth to the Sixth, to be made public. But there exist several more or less explicit references to them in his correspondence and musical sketches. The references in his letters are intended for people close to him, not for the general public. Thus, while working on the Sixth Symphony, he could write the following lines to his nephew Vladimir Davydov on 23 February 1893:

Whilst I was on my travels I had an idea for another symphony, a programme symphony this time; but the programme will be left as an enigma – let people guess it for themselves – and the symphony will actually be called 'Programme Symphony' (No. 6). This programme is so intensely personal that as I was mentally composing it on my travels I frequently wept copiously.

Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov recounts the première of the Sixth Symphony in his memoirs:

I recall having asked him [Tchaikovsky], during the intermission, after the performance of the symphony, whether he had a programme for his composition. He replied that there was one, of course, but that he did not wish to announce it.

Tchaikovsky expressed himself specifically and in depth on the "intrinsic program" of his Fourth Symphony. In a much-quoted letter of 1 March 1878 to the work's dedicatee, Nadezhda von Meck, he singled out the fanfares that introduce the work like a rousing motto and reappear as a ghostly echo at the end of the finale:

The introduction is the germ of the whole symphony, unarguably the main idea. [...] This is Fate, that inexorable force which prevents our aspirations to happiness from reaching their goal, which jealously ensures that our well-being and peace are not complete and unclouded, which hangs over our heads like the sword of Damocles, which with steadfast persistence poisons our souls. It is invincible, you will never master it. One can only resign oneself to fruitless sorrow. – [...] life is a constant alternation between grim reality and evanescent visions and dreams of happiness ...

At the end of this letter Tchaikovsky emphasizes the paltriness of any ex post facto attempt to translate musical ideas and images into words, which can be nothing more than

"a general recollection of the passion and terror of what I went through."

Even more important with regard to the question of the intrinsic programs of Tchaikovsky's late symphonies is his letter of 8 April 1878 to his former composition pupil, Sergey Taneyev. Tchaikovsky valued Taneyev's expert opinion even when it turned out to be sharply disapproving. One of the faults that his pupil found with the Fourth Symphony was that it impressed him as "program music." Tchaikovsky replied:

So far as your remark that my symphony is programmatic is concerned, I agree entirely. But what I cannot see is why you should regard this as a failing. I fear the opposite, that is to say, I would not want my pen to produce symphonic works which expressed nothing and were merely an empty play of chords, rhythms, and modulations. Of course my symphony is programmatic, but the programme is such that it cannot possibly be formulated in words. That would provoke ridicule and would have a comic effect. But is this not what a symphony should be, i.e., the most lyrical of all musical forms? Should it not express everything for which there are no words but which struggles from the heart in search of expression? Incidentally, I admit that in my naiveté I had thought that the idea of this symphony was easy to understand, that its sense could be grasped in broad outline even without a programme. And please don't think I am trying to put myself forward as a source of deep emotions and great ideas which lie beyond words. I was not even trying to express new ideas. Fundamentally, my symphony is an imitation of Beethoven's Fifth; that is to say that I imitated the basic conception and not the musical ideas. Do you think that the Fifth Symphony has a programme? Not only does it have a programme, but there can be no argument about what it is trying to express. Much the same thing forms the basis of my symphony, and if you have not understood it all it means is that I am not Beethoven, about which fact I have never been in any doubt. I would add, moreover, that there is not a single phrase in that symphony (i.e. mine) which is not deeply felt, which is not the echo of some sincere emotion.

Another programmatic "Fate Symphony" is Tchaikovsky's Fifth of 1888. Several musical sketches for it, with verbal addenda, survive in one of the composer's notebooks. Here is his account of the "Program for the First Movement":

Intr[oduction]. Total submission before Fate, or, which is the same thing, the inscrutable designs of Providence. Allegro. I) Murmurs, doubts, laments, reproaches against ... XXX. II) Shall I cast myself into the embrace of faith??? A wonderful programme, if only it can be fulfilled.

In a sketch for the second movement he added the words "consolation," "a ray of light," and "no, there is no hope."

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The Symphony "Life" and the Sixth Symphony

The Sixth Symphony of 1893, known by the subtitle given to it by Tchaikovsky himself, "Pathétique," is a magnum opus not only of Tchaikovsky's oeuvre but of the entire

symphonic tradition in Russia. It was preceded by a number of symphonic projects: we have already mentioned the failed E-flat major Symphony of 1891/92, which, after finishing the Sixth Symphony, Tchaikovsky reworked into his Third Piano Concerto. This symphony is preceded by sketches for a symphony entitled "Life" that dates from May 1891:

The first movement: an all-out impetus, certainty, thirst for activity. It must be concise (the finale – death – the result of destruction) (the second movement, love; the third, disillusionment; the fourth ends by fading away – it, too, is concise).

The Sixth Symphony is personal and subjective through and through. Tchaikovsky never enlarged on its "secret program" – a fact that has given rise to much interpretation and guesswork. These have proceeded not so much from a musical analysis of the work as from selected, pessimistically tinged statements from the composer in several letters, the quotation of a melody from the Russian Orthodox funeral rite (in the development section of the first movement), and the unusual finale, an Adagio lamentoso. The Sixth Symphony, with its central motif of a descending suspended second, its various other motifs and topoi of lamentation, and its quotations in the outside movements, has been construed as a "symphonic Requiem." It has also been viewed as the composer's artistic reckoning with his biographical and mental predicament, and above all it has been associated with his sexual proclivities.

To see the life, nature, and personality of a creative artist reflected in the products of his art, and to use the one to illuminate the other, seems to me a highly problematical business. Art should be measured first and foremost on the basis of artistic criteria, craftsmanship and aesthetics. The analysis and interpretation of works of art will lead to their "contents" and approach "intrinsic programs" and "internal processes" (to quote Liszt) of the sort that have inspired instrumental music – and especially symphonic music – from Beethoven and Berlioz to Gustav Mahler. These "contents" and "intrinsic programs" constitute the essence of "romantic" and "late romantic" music. They unquestionably have something to do with the artist as human being and with his social, cultural and personal experiences, but not in the prosaic sense that they capture them in a mirror-reflection. Rather, they project the eternal and universal themes of the human condition, using the resources of the non-verbal and yet so richly expressive and "meaningful" language of music.

Was it not precisely these themes that Tchaikovsky adumbrated in the above-mentioned programmatic sketch to his "Life" Symphony? And doesn't this sketch, like his above statements on the Fourth and Fifth Symphonies, point in a direction we may also pursue when studying or consciously listening to the Sixth? The overriding theme of Tchaikovsky's late symphonies is human life in general and the life of the artist in particular, life with all its struggles, its subordination to destiny, its joys and sorrows, its successes and failures, its inexorable demands and its immutable final destination: death. In no other work by Tchaikovsky is this complex of themes so plainly in view as in the *Pathétique*. In no other work did he create musical imagery of similar clarity, validity, and profundity for the eternal themes of the human condition. The images are harrowing and exhilarating, enthralling, overwhelming and oppressive. And as the Adagio lamentoso of the final movement fades away into nothingness, we even find images of submission to and reconciliation with Fate.