

## OPENING NIGHT: TCHAIKOVSKY AND GOOD PROGRAM NOTES

### COMPOSER'S REFLECTION by Scott Good

#### 1. Between the Rooms – Concerto for Trumpet and Orchestra (2008, rev 2024)

Part 1 - Energetic!  
Part 2 - Lyric  
Part 3 - Allegro Agitato  
*(played without pause)*

After the experience of composing my saxophone concerto, Babbitt, I realized that the concerto format was an ideal platform for a composer. The music can be focused on the soloist, much like how the protagonist functions in a novel. The orchestra acts as a counterpart, establishing colourful contexts and creating vivid interactions, even conflicts with the soloist. With this in mind, the trumpet makes for an ideal solo instrument, with its brilliant tone, wide dynamic range and expressive variety, able to carry well against the power of the orchestra.

At the onset of composing, I asked soloist, former principal trumpet of the Kitchener-Waterloo Symphony Orchestra Larry Larson, if there were any non-musical points of influence he would like to share to inspire the music. He provided me with the poem "I Died for Beauty" by Emily Dickinson - a poem that he was not only moved by but had also worked with musically in the past. These evocative words affected me immediately upon reading and became the catalyst for the composing of the slow movement in the concerto, sandwiched "between the rooms" so to speak of the outer fast movements.

I Died for Beauty  
by Emily Dickenson

I died for beauty, but was scarce  
Adjusted in the tomb,  
When one who died for truth was lain  
In an adjoining room.

He questioned softly why I failed?  
"For beauty," I replied.  
"And I for truth, the two are one;  
We brethren are," he said.

And so, as kinsmen met at night,  
We talked between the rooms.  
Until the moss had reached our lips,  
And covered up our names.

2. Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky (1840-1893)  
Symphony No. 6 in B minor, Op.74, "Pathétique"

When the *Pathétique* Symphony was first performed, on October 28, 1893 in St. Petersburg, Tchaikovsky was on the podium, and the audience was respectfully cool. When it was performed the second time, on November 18, Tchaikovsky was in his grave and the response was overwhelming.

Well, he wasn't a great conductor. But the coincidence of his unexpected death a mere nine days after the appearance of such a portentous symphony, in such a key (B minor, recalling Schubert's "Unfinished") and with such a subtitle (suggested shortly after the premiere by his brother Modest) forged an inevitable association between the composer's piece and his passing, leading naturally to the question: were they in some way related?

The short answer is no, although there is enough apparent evidence lying around to preoccupy Poirot. Tchaikovsky was a notable neurotic, ridden with guilt over his homosexuality, who had once attempted suicide in the wake of a calamitous marriage. His spirits in his last months were depressed by the deaths of several friends and family members, and he was increasingly aware of his own premature aging. By his own admission, he had wept over the writing of this work, so powerfully had it affected him. But Modest's account of his final days makes it clear that Tchaikovsky was not suicidal.

Except that Modest's story doesn't check in all its details. His 'official' version of events, that Tchaikovsky drank unboiled water at lunch and contracted fatal cholera, was issued to quell rampant rumours about the death, but questions remained: why would Modest serve unboiled water during an epidemic (others placed this event in a restaurant); how could the composer develop the disease in a quarter of the necessary incubation time; and why were no precautions taken to prevent mourners from contacting the presumably infectious corpse? Suicide by poison has always been suspected, and most recently the theory has been spiced up by allegations that Tchaikovsky was coerced into poisoning himself to satisfy an outraged noble's honour regarding supposed improper advances made to his son. None of this can be verified until Poirot takes the case.

In any case, the symphony was composed seven months earlier, too soon to be a suicide note or premonition, and was orchestrated that summer. In fact, it was the second symphony Tchaikovsky had written since publishing his Fifth; the other, in E flat, dissatisfied him and he abandoned it, retaining however a programme which he had had in mind for it: "...essence of the symphony is *Life*. First part—all impulsive passion, confidence...Must be short (the finale *death*—result of collapse). Second part love: third disappointments; fourth ends dying away (also short)". Evidently with some modifications this plan underlay the *Pathétique* as well. That he had had a programme Tchaikovsky acknowledged, although he would not divulge it: "Guess it who may" was his comment.

The influence of such a programme explains the unorthodox form of the Sixth Symphony, with its episodic first movement, its off-centre waltz, its finale apparently in the middle and slow movement at the end (the pattern would later be adopted by Mahler and others). It is music of extremes: of volume (the customary limits of notation, as soft [*ppp*] or as loud [*fff*] as possible, are extended to *pppppp* and *ffff*); of contrast (beware the end of the famous slow theme in the first movement); and of emotional expression (compare the whizbang scales of the ebullient march with the sombreness of the very ending, with its expiring divided basses). But in quality of workmanship everyone from Tchaikovsky himself to his fiercest detractors has placed it at the top of his oeuvre, with the first movement gaining particular plaudits for its novelty, power and conciseness.

The symphony opens with a pregnant introduction (which contrary to Nature was conceived after the gestation of the movement itself): a solo bassoon slowly and grimly foreshadows the main theme of the Allegro, stated in the subdued colours of violas and cellos. After some light and balletic treatment and a hint of explosions to come, the tempo slows for one of Tchaikovsky's most famous melodies, popularly associated with Love, but sounding a bit world-weary and, in the constant return of its opening phrase, unsatisfied. Dance-like woodwind arabesques, with an innocent-sounding falling scale appended, intervene before the "love" theme is passionately repeated.

The development starts with a crash and terrifying tocsins frame a quotation from the traditional Russian Requiem in the trombones, "With thy saints, O Christ, give peace to the soul of thy servant". The main theme returns amidst the fury, leading to a colossal outburst of despair rooted in the earlier 'innocent falling scale', which in fact is a figure Tchaikovsky habitually associated with Fate, notably in his Fifth Symphony. "Love" shakily reasserts its claim, but yields to a solemn elegiac coda with hymnal winds

over descending plucked string scales. The movement seems dream-like in its juxtaposition of contrasted sections.

The second movement is a genetically modified waltz, with five beats in a bar rather than three, which doubtless contributed to the puzzlement Tchaikovsky noted in the first-night audience (the critic Hanslick found the meter “disagreeable” and suggested adding a beat to each measure to make it work out—which is why he was a critic and not a composer). In the middle section another fateful descending scale sighs over potentially menacing repeated notes in the timpani and basses.

A stimulant is definitely needed at this point, and Tchaikovsky has supplied it in the form of a hybrid of bustling scherzo and vigorous march. Whether its triumph is genuine or over-the-top manic posturing is a matter of interpretation, but it is a tour-de-force of orchestral virtuosity, occasionally recalling *The Nutcracker* ballet which the composer had recently completed. It almost invariably calls forth applause as though it were a finale; this is perhaps just as well, because the actual finale, as in *Life*, does not.

Here the falling scale from the waltz trio, representing Death according to Tchaikovsky’s programme, is plainly audible in the first theme (although not, in the score, visible: it is ingeniously played off between the two violin sections). A second great melody, of consolation or resignation, is cut off in full cry. The fatal theme becomes increasingly agitated, the strangled rattle of hand-stopped horns punctuating the crisis, until the struggle ceases at a stroke of the gong. After a benediction of brass the Theme of Consolation is gradually lowered into the depths.

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