

‘The Victim of Death-Rays from Mars’: An Evaluation of ‘gap-filling’ in Chaikovskii Biographies

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Abstract

This article assesses the perils of biography through two contentious events in the life of nineteenth-century Russian composer Petr Ilyich Chaikovskii (1840–93). Investigations into the historical often mandate that biographers ‘fill the gap’ in the narratives they are to construct when met with an absence of unequivocal traces, thus rendering the prized truth rather elusive. This has been particularly so for Chaikovskii whose death – the first of the events studied in this article – has sparked an immediate debate that remains unabated in modern-day music research. The second exploration concerns the sudden cessation of Chaikovskii’s patron Nadezhda fon Meck which had implications for biographers’ narrative rendering of the relationship dynamics between composer and patron. Rather than seeking to establish the ‘truth’, this article concerns itself with the function that the events serve in the overarching narrative presented by the numerous biographers.

Keywords

music, Chaikovskii, biography, suicide theory, musicology, history

Introduction

In the 2007 BBC documentary on Petr Ilyich Chaikovskii, the final days of the composer were re-enacted; in one scene, Chaikovskii, on his deathbed, utters: 'I've lost everybody. Why has fate punished me so?'¹ In addition to these scripted lines, director Matthew Whiteman drew further attention to the notion of 'loss' with the inclusion of scenes that depicted the departure of Chaikovskii's mother after she had taken the young composer-to-be to the Imperial School for Jurisprudence (where he boarded) for the first time; and the moment Chaikovskii learns of the termination of the patronage (and friendship) of Nadezhda fon Mekh in his final years. Indeed, the concepts of 'loss' and 'fate' pervade biographical narratives pertaining to Chaikovskii in both literary and audio-visual mediums². Such use of overarching themes on the part of the narrator are constituent to attempts at presenting the lives of subjects as coherent wholes and make for palatable narrations with their emotional highs and lows. This invented coherence or pattern, however, runs the risk of simplification and its existence may provide only the 'satisfactions of fiction'³. The truth is often more complicated.

Musicians' biographies traditionally assume a position on the peripheries of music scholarship; that said, biography has begun to edge to the core of scholarship with the recent work of Christopher Wiley and Joanne Cormac amongst others. As it is both a medium of writing for scholars and novelists (often with a keen interest in the historical), biographies embrace factual and documentary evidence on the one hand and espouse – much like realistic novels – narrative formulas that 'provide readers with the illusion of totality and closure' on the other⁴. Such formulas often require biographers to 'paper over the cracks' with their own hypotheses in the absence of unequivocal traces or evidence. As these vices have not been eradicated even by the intense wave of positivism in musicology's past – and perhaps will not be for the foreseeable future as the discipline continues to distance itself from positivism – biographies and the employment of such methods continue to thrive in its

¹ The documentary was produced in two parts subtitled 'The Creation of Greatness' and 'Triumph and Tragedy'. See *Tchaikovsky: A personal exploration* by Charles Hazlewood, dir. by Matthew Whiteman (London: BBC, 2007).

² A two-part film on Chaikovskii was titled 'Tchaikovsky's Women' and 'Fate'. See, *Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky, Two films*, dir. by Christopher Nupen (Guildford: Allegro Films, 2009).

³ Leo Treitler elaborates on the satisfaction one may gain from recognising patterns in the past that may not exist apart from an understanding of it in the present. See Leo Treitler, 'Chapter 6 – What Kind of Story Is History?' in *Music and the Historical Imagination* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989), pp. 157–176 (pp. 167–168).

⁴ Jolanta T. Pekacz, 'Memory, History and Meaning: Musical Biography and its Discontents,' *Journal of Musicological Research* 23, 1 (2004), 42, 39–80.

present form⁵. One's interest in the biographical details of a composer may be attributed to the search for meaning in the abstract and ethereal art of music. As Carl Dahlhaus argues, in light of the failure of aesthetic communication on the part of the work, psychological (ergo speculative) reasons relating to its author are sought to explain the work's meaning.⁶

It is unsurprising to find the narrative of the life of Chaikovskii rewritten time and again as the composer's 'afterlife' persistently teems with myths and theories. The longevity of these conjectures is sustained by the absence of several key pieces of conclusive evidence. The cause of the composer's death, for instance, is speculated about a great deal as it raises questions of social and psychological inconsistencies and abnormalities. These speculations emerged almost immediately after Chaikovskii's death in 1893, as Richard Taruskin writes:

Even (or especially) in that milieu, however, people wondered at the abrupt circumstances of Tchaikovsky's death and the social stigma they implied. Cholera was incompatible with Tchaikovsky's exalted public image – 'simply insulting,' wrote a later editor of *Novoye vremya* – and alternative causes were sought. It was an ideal incubator for rumors.⁷

The once-feverish level of participation in mythmaking/myth-busting by scholars is perhaps driven by the enduring popularity of Chaikovskii's music; the attractiveness of such activities is boosted by the mystery of the unconventional ending to Chaikovskii's final work, the *Pathétique Symphony*.⁸

In this essay, I evaluate the attempts made to 'fill the gaps' in Chaikovskii biographies with a focus on two contentious events in the composer's life. The first will be of Chaikovskii's death on which I refer to the differing conclusions on the cause of death – by cholera and by suicide – as propagated by biographers Alexander Poznansky, and Alexandra Orlova and David Brown respectively. Taruskin has served as a zealous supporter of Poznansky in this debate with his

⁵ For more on musicians biographies, listen Nicholas Ong and Terrence Wong "On Biographies (with Joanne Cormac)", *Crafting Musical Lives* (October 2020), <<https://tinyurl.com/2n9w89pb>> [accessed 22 May 2022].

⁶ Carl Dahlhaus, *Ludwig van Beethoven: Approaches to his Music*, trans. Mary Whittall (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991), p. 6.

⁷ Richard Taruskin, 'Pathetic Symphonist: Chaikovsky, Russia, Sexuality, and the Study of Music,' in *On Russian Music*, Richard Taruskin (Berkeley and Los Angeles, CA: University of California Press, 2009), pp.76–104 (p. 80).

⁸ Rather than a triumphant conclusion (in line with conventions), the 6th symphony (or the *Pathétique*) ends bleakly with soft – in volume – tones and in a dark mood connoted by the minor key tonality. The symphony's alternative title which utilises the French word '*Pathétique*' has misled many to understand the work to conjure the sentiments of pity – or, perhaps, self-pity which supports a motivation for suicide – though a more accurate translation of the Russian original '*Патетическая* (Pateticheskaya)' describes it, rather, to be intensely emotional.

belligerent criticism against Brown's account. My evaluation will consider the broader functions of biographies beyond solely establishing absolute truths – should that even be possible. The second event in focus is the portrayal of the correspondence between Chaikovskiy and Nadezhda fon Meck which communicated her intention to terminate her patronage. It is unknown whether the letter conveying this message has survived.⁹ Though scholars have seemingly been less concerned with the uncertainties in relation to this event, biographers had still to fulfil the mandate to 'fill the gap' in manners they deem appropriate to their grand narratives. The event illuminates, in the view of some biographers, the dependence of the misanthropic Chaikovskii on his patron for emotional stability and not merely for financial stability as a patronage in the conventional sense might suggest.

Suicide Theory

The Russian newspaper *Novoye vremya* reported on 26 August 1878 that key personnel at the Moscow Conservatory, where Tchaikovsky was Professor of Music Theory, harboured 'amours of a different kind'.¹⁰ Chaikovskii had interpreted this statement as a clear reference to his sexuality as he subsequently wrote of his exasperation to his brother Modest.¹¹ This demonstration of psychological turmoil evinced through the primary source of letters has facilitated scholars in characterising Chaikovskii as one who lived with a persistent internal struggle. Coupled with the anecdote of an earlier attempted suicide, this struggle lends credence to the theory by biographers that he eventually took his own life.¹²

Proponents of the suicide theory believed that Chaikovskii died of a disease that instigated symptoms similar to that of cholera. There remains an argument to be made amongst proponents that the disease could have been cholera itself. The dispute lies in determining if contracting the disease was intentional or not – the former would vindicate the suicide theory. For one to believe that Chaikovskii's death by cholera was unintended, one would have to perceive that the composer contracted cholera by chance. In this case, it is unsurprising for unconvinced interlocutors to express dissatisfaction over the incorporation of

⁹ The Chaikovskii Research website states that the letters from fon Meck 'are preserved in the Klin House-Museum archive', possibly awaiting editing. See 'Correspondence with Nadezhda von Meck,' *Tchaikovsky Research*, <http://en.tchaikovsky-research.net/pages/Correspondence_with_Nadezhda_von_Meck> [accessed 27 November 2020].

¹⁰ Quoted in Taruskin, 'Pathetic Symphonist,' p. 78.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² The earlier suicide attempt was succinctly described by David Brown. See David Brown, 'Review-Article: How Did Tchaikovsky Come to Die – And Does It Really Matter?' *Music & Letters* 78, 4 (1997), 581–588 (p. 588).

chance at a crucial point of Chaikovskii's life narrative as, according to Reinhart Koselleck, '[w]herever chance is made use of historiographically, it indicates an inadequate consistency of given conditions and an incommensurability in their results'.¹³ The suicide theory therefore renders Chaikovskii's death narrative coherent by incorporating his psychological turmoil and eliminating the fortuity of his cholera contraction.

An exponent of the above theory is Alexandra Orlova who has written assertively that the letters between Chaikovskii and his brothers Modest and Anatoly reveal 'indisputably that Tchaikovsky's homosexuality was inborn, and that he was cruelly tormented by it throughout his life. His whole existence was poisoned – the fear of exposure persecuted him unceasingly'.¹⁴ She expounds on the 'court of honour' narrative which leverages on the torment brought upon Chaikovskii by his homosexuality, eventually leading him to acquiesce to the court's demand of a staged suicide. Notwithstanding that 'the tortured artist' is a romantic trope (and so somewhat suspicious), David Brown's four-volume biography of Chaikovskii picked up the baton from Orlova with regard to the dissemination of the suicide theory, which has gained him the title from Taruskin of 'the leader of the British suicide squadron'.¹⁵ While asserting his neutral stance, claiming that '[i]t is doubtful we shall ever know the truth for certain', Brown argues cogently against Chaikovskii's contracting of cholera by highlighting an inconsistency with the disease's incubation period, and that the composer's body was left on display for visitors after his death as opposed to the usual custom of immediate removal in a closed coffin.¹⁶ He makes explicit his commitment to the 'court of honour' narrative initiated by Orlova for it uses recently-emerged verbal evidence by Aleksandr Voitov and Nataliya Kuznetsova-Vladimova. This contrasts with the heavy reliance by those who believe that Chaikovskii died of cholera on Modest's historic account of the composer's final days.¹⁷ In addition, Brown has revealed elsewhere personal experiences which encouraged his investment in the suicide theory. He revealed to musicologist David Osmond-Smith in an interview for the *European Gay Review*:

¹³ Reinhart Koselleck, 'Chance as Motivational Trace in Historical Writing,' in *Futures Past: On the Semantics of Historical Time* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1985), pp. 116–129 (p. 117).

¹⁴ Alexandra Orlova and David Brown, 'Tchaikovsky: The Last Chapter,' *Music & Letters* 62, 2 (1981), 125–145 (p. 126).

¹⁵ Brown, 'Review-Article: How Did Tchaikovsky Come to Die,' p. 587.

¹⁶ David Brown, *Tchaikovsky: A Biographical and Critical Study, Volume IV: The Final Years (1885–1893)* (London: Victor Gollancz Ltd, 1991), p. 485.

¹⁷ The verbal evidence by Voitov and Kuznetsova-Vladimova were recorded first-hand by Orlova.

Yes, I admit there may be an element of wishful thinking here, for my initial attitudes toward homosexuality were formed many years ago at a time when the general social view was that it was not only tainting but essentially immoral, and however much I have shifted my views since then, something of that gut reaction remains, and there's nothing I can do about it – sadly. But since these sorts of attitudes were the very ones Tchaikovsky himself not only encountered but seems in large part to have accepted as being a fair judgement on his condition, it may be that I can perceive his feelings and judge his reactions with a particular understanding – and may I add, a particular sympathy.¹⁸

In this statement, Brown postulates that a personal indignity was felt by Chaikovskii which he conflates with the social pressures asserted by the alleged public's repugnance of homosexuality. In essence, Brown correlates Chaikovskii's experience to his own (which centres around the oppressive levels of homophobia) and disregards the different social conditions of the eras and settings in which the two had lived, an act – in the eyes of scholars concerned with 'truths' – of academic faux pas that has led some to discredit his account as the biography may be seen to be as much (or more) about Brown as it is about Chaikovskii. To modern readers in particular, Brown's approach may seem especially peculiar as Christopher Wiley has since (after the publishing of Brown's biographies) called for the musicological practice of biography to consider thoroughly 'the extent of the implication of the authors within their work'.¹⁹ Brown bolsters the case of Chaikovskii's sense of pathos by citing the composer's encounter with a male prostitute which was communicated to Modest: Be that as it may, this young man has much *good* at the roof [root?] of his soul. But, my God, how pitiable is he, how thoroughly debauched! And instead of helping him to better himself, I only contributed to his further going down.²⁰

Brown argues that '[Chaikovskii's] reaction is not one of idealistic pity but of deep personal guilt, for he knew perfectly well that his fleeting sexual partner only became "thoroughly debauched" through satisfying the sexual demands of men such as himself'.²¹ Having placed himself and Chaikovskii in milieux with similar social views (as mentioned above), Brown deduces Chaikovskii's psychological responses from his own hypothetical ones with his own considerably strict moral standards. Arguably, this morality may as well condemn prostitution

¹⁸ Quoted in Taruskin, 'Pathetic Symphonist,' pp. 90–91.

¹⁹ Christopher Wiley, 'Biography and the New Musicology' (paper presented at the Ninth International Conference of The Departments of Musicology and Ethnomusicology, Faculty of Music, University of Arts, Belgrade, Serbia, April 19–22, 2008), 15.

²⁰ As quoted in Brown, 'How Did Tchaikovsky Come to Die,' p. 584.

²¹ Ibid.

in addition to homosexuality. With that considered, it is difficult to conceive of a dissimilar response from Chaikovskii had he been heterosexual and the prostitute female.²² The concern of the episode should thus be confined to the moral evaluation of Chaikovskii's engagement with prostitution and not with the psychological distress resulting from the involvement in activities that make ostensible to Chaikovskii his disapproved sexual inclinations.

Taruskin is perhaps the most vocal of those opposed to the suicide theory. He echoes the sentiment of *New York Times* critic Donal Henahan that the suicide theory 'inspired belief because it "reeks of the conspiratorial atmosphere of old Russian novels"'.²³ The resemblance highlighted between the narrative adopted by Brown's biography and novels is elucidating, and is perhaps what fuels Taruskin's critiques. Brown's assertion that 'a reasonable assumption that something would have been unlikely to happen because of prevailing attitudes and practices is no proof that it could not have happened'²⁴ received a response of derision from Taruskin: 'It is also true that nobody has yet proved that Tchaikovsky was not a victim of death-rays from Mars.'²⁵ Though unconvinced by her account, Taruskin was more charitable to Orlova however, as he wrote:

Her uncritical acceptance of venerable hearsay must be ascribed to delusion engendered in a scholar who has lived her life in an atmosphere of public mendacity and repression of fact, where anything secret or forbidden was granted an automatic presumption of veracity.²⁶

Those of the 'cholera camp' (such as Taruskin and Poznansky) are adamant that Chaikovskii's sexuality had no part to play in his death, broadly arguing that the society of nineteenth-century Russia did not partake in the 'othering' or 'essentialising' of homosexual individuals. Poznansky explains that '[a]lthough [homosexuality was] disapproved of in theory, sexual idiosyncrasies were in practice tolerated by and large both by the authorities and by public

²² Whilst heterosexual men in the nineteenth century who engage with female prostitution might be considered blameless and morally just due to religious ideologies, this critique is based on Brown's own morality and social views as alluded to in his interview with the *European Gay Review* quoted above.

²³ Quoted in Taruskin, 'Pathetic Symphonist,' p. 87.

²⁴ Brown, 'How Did Tchaikovsky Come to Die,' pp. 583–584.

²⁵ Richard F. Taruskin and David Brown, "'Tchaikovsky's Last Days": II,' *Music & Letters* 79, 3 (1998), 468–469 (p. 468).

²⁶ Taruskin, 'Pathetic Symphonist,' p. 86.

opinion'.²⁷ To rebut, Orlova argues against the dismissal of the detrimental effects of Chaikovskii's self-awareness on such grounds, as she stated:

There were, after all, many people in his position even at that time, who were not all burdened by the fact that they had similar proclivities; but for a man of Tchaikovsky's psychological sensitivity it was a terrible, irretrievable disaster beyond his capacity to bear.²⁸

Orlova, however, has not provided evidence of the composer's 'psychological sensitivity'; regardless, it would still not justify Chaikovskii's sensitivity to matters of his sexuality. The assumption that Chaikovskii's opinions on his sexuality are solely conditioned by his social environment is problematic. Whilst referring mainly to the relationship between context and an author's work, Jolanta T. Pekacz's precept seems relevant here; she claims that 'the contextual approach largely ignores the issue of the authorial presence and typically does not frame its premises and arguments within any authorial lexicon, thus becoming similar to the very tradition it seeks to defy'.²⁹ By fading Chaikovskii into the background of the allegedly homosexual-tolerant society of nineteenth-century Russia, Taruskin (and others who take a similar approach) removes Chaikovskii's agency in defining his own perspective on his sexual identity and renders it a responsibility of the composer's social milieu. Such an act sits in tension with the writing of a narrative centred on a specific subject.

Whilst much attention has been paid to the content of biographies, it is perhaps the historical framework of biography as a genre that warrants examination. Writing on the function of biographies in nineteenth-century Britain, Christopher Wiley highlights that '[biographies] were produced with the aim of educating as well as entertaining their reader, thereby nurturing the broad social movement of self-improvement that emerged in the course of the century'.³⁰ Biographies were published in series that serviced 'the needs of British working-class autodidact culture'.³¹ The sociability and social impact of biography is of interest here. It is in this vein that one might begin to see the value of Brown's biography. The

²⁷ Alexander Poznansky, 'Tchaikovsky: The Man behind the Myth,' *The Musical Times* 136, 1826 (1995), 175–182 (p. 178). Taruskin also claims that 'homosexuality, in those days, simply did not, as today's critics say it, "essentialize" a person'. Neither did it 'typecast, or stereotype, or render one's nature darkly and irrevocably Other.' See Taruskin, 'Pathetic Symphonist,' p. 79.

²⁸ Alexandra Orlova, *Tchaikovsky: A Self-Portrait*, trans. R.M. Davidson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), p. x.

²⁹ Pekacz, 'Memory, History and Meaning,' pp. 77–78.

³⁰ Christopher Wiley, 'Biography and Life-Writing,' in *The Oxford Handbook of Music and Intellectual Culture in the Nineteenth Century*, eds. Paul Watt, Sarah Collins, and Michael Allis (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020), pp. 77–101 (p. 78).

³¹ *Ibid.*

credible connection between homosexuality and suicidal thoughts and tendencies perceivable in Brown's claims is likely to render the account believable to the non-scholar. Brown's propagation of the suicide theory can thus be seen as a means to underscore and reinforce an aspiration for positive social change – to provide motivation for societies to address the psychological issues faced by homosexual individuals; its impact is enhanced by Chaikovskii's cultural status and significance. It is worth reiterating that Brown's account of Chaikovskii's life is a better reflection of Brown (and the rather noble aim described) than the historical facts of the composer's life.

A counterargument may be anticipated from positivists focused on biographical truths about the composer, who may further argue that the use of a biographical subject as a tool for one's own social agenda contradicts the fundamental responsibilities of a biographer. To that, readers are reminded by Brown that 'the relevant materials are in the public domain' – including, crucially, the opposing conclusions of the biographies – and that '[readers] do not need [biographers] to make up their minds for them'.³² It should be stressed once again that said 'readers' are not limited to scholars and their investigative propensities, but also include non-specialists and their likely proclivities for a coherent narrative. As far as the scholarly community is concerned, however, believers of the suicide theory – i.e., Brown, Orlova, and their followers – are but now a minority sustained by their conviction of the flurry of falsified information made public in the immediate days of Chaikovskii's death.³³

In a letter to his wife, Russian author Leo Tolstoy wrote of the rumours surrounding the composer's demise: 'Gossip has not ceased. It hasn't ceased for one day, for one year'.³⁴ 'For one century', one might add. Whilst the cause remains disputed, it perhaps does no harm to reap the benefits of a speculative narrative for the social good.

Myth of the Muse

Chaikovskii's relationships with women too have become an area of interest amongst scholars and biographers. Musicians' biographies – typically of white male subjects – have traditionally subscribed to what Christopher Wiley has termed the 'muse paradigm', which

³² Taruskin and Brown, "'Tchaikovsky's Last Days": II,' p. 469. Brown has also consolidated the many accounts of Chaikovskii's death – arguing for both cholera and suicide – into a 1993 publication. See David Brown, ed., *Tchaikovsky Remembered* (London and Boston: Faber and Faber Limited, 1993).

³³ Philip Ross Bullock provides examples of these false accounts in Philip Ross Bullock, *Pyotr Tchaikovsky* (London: Reaktion Books Ltd, 2016), pp. 181–184.

³⁴ Quoted in Orlova and Brown, 'Tchaikovsky: The Last Chapter,' p. 137.

serve[s] to enforce the androcentricity of the musical canon in that it effectively denied women the possibility of artistic creation in music (as distinct from mere reproduction of these works in performance), while simultaneously linking them inextricably to such activities undertaken by their associated male composers.³⁵

As a result of a disastrous marriage, Chaikovskii's first wife Antonina Miliukova consistently fails to serve as the muse for biographers in their writings. This position is thus relegated to his patron Nadezhda fon Meck with whom Chaikovskii was better acquainted. Indeed, fon Meck is inextricable from any biographical writing on Chaikovskii. The quantity of coverage in biographies of the letter informing Chaikovskii of his patron's termination of her patronage and the composer's response varies, though it is generally brief. More nebulous are the reasons for her decision to do so. One crucial piece of evidence to this investigation of their correspondence is Chaikovskii's response to fon Meck dated 4 October 1890.³⁶ Edwin Evans's succinct biography of the composer, first published in 1906 as part of J.M. Dent's Master Musicians series, makes no reference to the exchange between Chaikovskii and fon Meck or the involvement of physical evidence, should there be any at all, summarising that 'the arrangement [of his stipend] came to an end. Unfortunately, so did their correspondence, which had lasted now close upon fourteen years, and the composer felt deeply hurt that this should be so'.³⁷ Evans provides no justification for fon Meck's act – nor any information about the tone with which she communicated the termination of her patronage – but succumbs, despite the biography's conciseness, to the temptation of dramatic tragedy afforded by the anecdote that in Chaikovskii's final hours, 'the name of Nadezhda Filaretovna was perpetually on his lips'.³⁸

John Warrack's *Tchaikovsky* reveals more about the emotional terms of fon Meck's act. Warrack affirms that there was a letter dated 4 October 1890 which communicated her intention to 'break off his allowance' as 'she was on the verge of bankruptcy'.³⁹ Whilst Warrack has explained that the letter 'has not survived', he was able to disclose through unspecified

³⁵ Wiley, 'Biography and the New Musicology,' 10.

³⁶ Dates in this section are provided in New Style which, in the nineteenth century, is twelve days ahead of the Julian calendar which remained in use in Russia until 1918. Chaikovskii's full response (dated 22 September 1890 in Old Style) may be found on the Chaikovskii Research website. See 'Letter 4221,' *Tchaikovsky Research*, <http://en.tchaikovsky-research.net/pages/Letter_4221> [accessed 1 December 2020].

³⁷ Edwin Evans, *Tchaikovsky*, rev. ed. (London: J.M. Dent & Sons Ltd., 1935), p. 50.

³⁸ This anecdote was first recorded in Modest Chaikovskii's biography of the composer. See *ibid.*, pp. 50–51.

³⁹ John Warrack, *Tchaikovsky* (London: Hamish Hamilton Ltd, 1973), p. 241.

means that she concluded with the following: ‘Do not forget, and remember sometimes’.⁴⁰ This account raises several curious questions: how was the conclusion by fon Mekk in the letter communicated to Warrack (for he could not have seen the letter personally after claiming that it did not survive)? Has anybody (before Warrack) had access to the letter at all? It is safer to bet on the existence of such a letter than its survival as Chaikovskii’s response has been documented; it is plausible that Warrack had reconstructed fon Mekk’s final statement through Chaikovskii’s response – as Poznansky had done, more below. These queries notwithstanding, Warrack denounces fon Mekk’s claim of her declining wealth as the reason for the termination of her patronage – once again, possibly, deduced from Chaikovskii’s response – believing that her finances remained stable. He then diverts the reader’s sympathy for fon Mekk by describing the increasingly difficult familial and physiological circumstance under which she had lived. To antagonise fon Mekk again, Warrack concludes with an emphasis on her phlegmatic nature: ‘To [Chaikovskii’s] miserable imagination, the entire relationship was now corrupted, himself degraded to the position of a rich woman’s plaything, a servant to her emotions who had been engaged for a suitable wage and then dismissed’.⁴¹ In contrast to Percy M. Young who writes in *Letters to his Family: An Autobiography* that ‘Tchaikovsky never replied to this letter’, Warrack highlights Chaikovskii’s impulse to respond – and that he most definitely did.⁴² Young dates fon Mekk’s letter to the end of September 1890 in Old Style, arguably 22 September and hence 4 October 1890 in New Style and in agreement with the date provided by Warrack.

As an immediate family member of Chaikovskii (and one whose correspondence with the composer remains the most extensive), Modest Chaikovskii and his three-volume biography of his older brother naturally makes a strong claim for being the most genuine, especially with the biography’s use of letters as primary material. Indeed, his biography – and the abridged version in English by British champion of Russian music, Rosa Newmarch, published in 1906 – has remained an important source for scholarly research into the composer’s life. Newmarch writes of her recognition of the declining practicality of multi-volume publications and its potentially poor marketability amongst her target audience of Anglo-American readers.⁴³

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Ibid., 243.

⁴² Interestingly, this false statement was not called out by Warrack in his review of Young’s publication. See John Warrack, ‘Reviews of Books,’ *Music & Letters* 63, 1–2 (1982), 138–141. For Percy M. Young’s account, see Petr Ilyich Chaikovskii, *Letters to his Family: An Autobiography*, trans. by Galina von Meck, with additional annotations by Percy M. Young (London: Dobson Books Ltd, 1981), p. 468.

⁴³ Modeste Tchaikovsky, *The Life & Letters of Peter Ilich Tchaikovsky*, trans. Rosa Newmarch (London: John Lane the Bodley Head, 1906), p. ix.

Nevertheless, she vows: ‘Wherever feasible, I have preferred to let Chaikovskii himself tell the story of his life.’⁴⁴ Whilst the letter that this section concerns itself with was dated 4 October in Warrack’s account, Newmarch (and, therefore, Modest) provides, rather bewilderingly, the date of 25 December 1890, which further accentuates the uncertainty surrounding the letter. Unfortunately, Newmarch/Modest imparts no further information on the contents of fon Mekk’s letter. Newmarch describes the financial stability furnished by the patron to Chaikovskii in the preceding years, setting up its termination to be completely unanticipated. This is followed with an extended translation of Chaikovskii’s reply of 4 October 1890 (which is consistent with accounts previously addressed) in which Chaikovskii reveals that his reliance on fon Mekk goes beyond the pecuniary:

Do you really think me incapable of remembering you when I no longer receive your money? [...] I may say without exaggeration that you saved me. I should certainly have gone out of my mind and come to an untimely end but your friendship and sympathy, as well as for the material assistance (then my safety anchor), which enabled me to rally my forces and take up once more my chosen vocation [...] I am glad you can now no longer spend your means upon me, so that I may show my unbounded and passionate gratitude, which passes all words.⁴⁵

Whether for the imminent financial loss or emotional loss, Chaikovskii concludes with an expression of despair: ‘I am too much upset to write well.’⁴⁶ Like Warrack, Newmarch/Modest disputes fon Mekk’s claims of her declining wealth, though they acknowledge that her health is indeed getting poorer. Following his response to fon Mekk, Chaikovskii writes of his dejection to Vladislav Pakhul’skii (who had begun acting as the link between the composer and his patron after the fateful letter): ‘But the inconceivable has happened, and all my ideas of human nature, all my faith in the best of humankind, have been turned upside down. My peace is broken, and the share of happiness fate has allotted me is embittered and spoilt.’⁴⁷ To call attention to the long-term effects of this episode, Newmarch/Modest concludes with the anecdote of the composer’s final hours – which was later reiterated by Evans, as mentioned above. Newmarch’s account then, can be understood to have centred on the emotional torment brought upon the composer by the episode, paying no heed to the circumstances of fon Mekk.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Ibid., pp. 612–613.

⁴⁶ Ibid., p. 613.

⁴⁷ For Chaikovskii’s letter to Pakhul’skii, see *ibid.*, 615–616.

In *Tchaikovsky: A Self-Portrait*, published in 1990, Alexandra Orlova corroborates Warrack's claim that the letter from fon Mekk has not survived and does not provide a possible date for the missing letter. Like Newmarch, Orlova – an émigré scholar who 'worked within various archives such as the Chaikovskii Museum at Klin, with free access to *all* materials' before leaving the Soviet Union in 1979⁴⁸ – alludes to Chaikovskii's ability to articulate the narrative on his own without her involvement, as she writes that she 'wanted to compile a book in which Chaikovskii's voice would come through loud and clear' and that 'the book is in fact an autobiography since it is Chaikovskii who is speaking to us in his own words'.⁴⁹ She too quotes Chaikovskii's response and his subsequent letter to Pakhul'skii. Other parallels can be drawn between the two accounts, including the unexpectedness of the termination and of fon Mekk's fabrication of being financially compromised. Additionally, Orlova advances the claim that Chaikovskii was aware that fon Mekk had lied about her financial circumstance as illuminated by his letter to his publisher Petr Jurgenson: 'And after all, I know perfectly well that from our point of view she is still immensely rich. It has, in short, all turned out to be a sordid, stupid affair which makes me sick and ashamed'.⁵⁰ One key piece of information provided by Orlova, having worked at the archives, is that some unpublished materials in the Klin archive have been destroyed – which implies complications for future, and perhaps past, research on the fateful letter from fon Mekk.

Alexander Poznansky's *Tchaikovsky: The Quest for the Inner Man* published in 1991, a year after Orlova's, defines itself explicitly as 'not a study of Tchaikovsky's music' but 'a study of the man who wrote the music'.⁵¹ With regard to the patronage termination, Poznansky provides the most extensive investigation, dedicating several pages to a speculation of the reasons for fon Mekk to do so. He hypothesises that the sudden cessation of Chaikovskii's funds was motivated by the familial pressure (which fon Mekk had hitherto kept at bay) exerted upon her for she would not, with her characteristic frankness and honesty, fail to forewarn her beneficiary of impending financial difficulties.⁵² On Chaikovskii's emotional response, Poznansky writes that '[h]e was pained by the abruptness of Mrs. von Meck's action and by the inadequacy of her explanation' and that '[f]or several days Tchaikovsky was in a state of depression'.⁵³ Poznansky also proffers an alternative scenario in which Pakhul'skii became the

⁴⁸ Emphasis added. The claim that she had 'access to all materials' was made by David Brown in his Foreword to Orlova, *Tchaikovsky*, v.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, ix and xvi.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 375.

⁵¹ Alexander Poznansky, *Tchaikovsky: The Quest for the Inner Man* (London: Lime Tree, 1993 [1991]), xi.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 515–519.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 520–521.

cause of the termination by fon Meck as he threatened her with the public pronouncement of Chaikovskii's homosexuality which would have a detrimental effect on his reputation; fon Meck accedes to Pakhul'skii's demand in order to protect Chaikovskii, hence the tone of seeming reluctance in her much-quoted final words to Chaikovskii. These propositions of familial pressure and Pakhul'skii's sordidness were reiterated in Roland John Wiley's *Tchaikovsky* published in 2009, albeit in truncated form. In addition, Wiley highlights that '[r]esponses to the break [in communication between Chaikovskii and his patron] have brought posterity to find Meck blameworthy'.⁵⁴ This verdict results from the myopic view that the episode concerns only fon Meck and Chaikovskii; fon Meck had committed a heartless act and so Chaikovskii deserves all sympathy for the ensuing emotional torment. Wiley attempts to vindicate fon Meck through a letter by Nikolay Kashkin which is the only primary source he quotes: 'Nevertheless, as I had occasion to hear from persons very close to her...she continually recalled Pyotr Ilyich...and would say that their friendship remained the best recollection of her life'.⁵⁵

David Brown's *Tchaikovsky: The Man and his Music* further complicates the relationship between Chaikovskii and fon Meck. In opposition to the accounts mentioned above, Brown dates the penultimate letter (which has largely been concluded to have survived) to 4 October 1890 in place of the letter in question. More interesting is what follows; whilst Brown does not provide an extensive investigation to the reason for fon Meck's termination, he writes of his exchange with fon Meck's granddaughter Galina von Meck. Chaikovskii had been forbidden to write to fon Meck directly and eventually stopped doing so even through Pakhul'skii as she consistently failed to respond. Galina confirms that her grandmother's atrophied arm rendered her incapable of writing but also that her grandmother's relationship with Chaikovskii remained cordial before their deaths. The latter claim is corroborated with an anecdote by Galina's mother who communicated Chaikovskii's apology for his neglect of Nadezhda: 'The apology was wholeheartedly accepted, and the news was passed to Tchaikovsky'.⁵⁶ Galina was said to have probed Brown: 'And you will write that they were reconciled?'⁵⁷ Galina's questionable concern demonstrates that complexities of communicating truths arise not merely from the subjectivity of biographers and subjects but also from intermediaries involved in the writing who are equally capable of distorting facts.

⁵⁴ Roland John Wiley, *Tchaikovsky* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), p. 349.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ David Brown, *Tchaikovsky: The Man and his Music* (London: Faber and Faber Limited, 2006), p. 388.

⁵⁷ Quoted in *ibid.*

Conclusion

Whilst facts are often used to inform, they can also serve as an adhesive between multiple speculative claims by historians and musicologists when used as ‘evidence’, thus providing these claims with an ‘interconnectedness’, and for a more coherent and grand narrative.⁵⁸ Such pursuits for ‘interconnectedness’ manifest themselves in the writing of biographies.

In the preface to his book, Roland John Wiley asks, ‘why another book about Tchaikovsky?’, to which he responds: ‘There are at least three reasons: the continuing popularity of his music warrants periodic reassessment; changing political and cultural mores; and, not least, reconsideration of someone who has suffered at the hands of biographers.’⁵⁹ This explanation too defines the grounds for this essay. Over the century, biographers have sought to resolve the many mysteries that may pervade one’s perception of Chaikovskii’s life after his death. The cause of his death has put to the test the investigation skills of musicologists and biographers. Whilst the case remains inconclusive, it should be noted that most scholars in the present day are in agreement of the ‘cholera’ theory as there is more evidence in favour of it.⁶⁰ To facilitate a reconciliation of all that has been said, I have proposed a re-evaluation of the social functions of biographies on the part of scholars. The popularity of Chaikovskii’s music – which is often described as intensely emotional – perpetuates the need for an equally romantic image of the composer. Scholars might argue that to create and sustain this image is to be dishonest to one’s responsibility as a ‘scientist’ of music who makes timeless discoveries; in dealing with biographies, however, said scholars ought to recognise the genre’s consideration of volatile social and cultural outlooks. In addition to the social causes certain biographies of Chaikovskii may serve – in this case, a motivation for society to address the connection between suicide and homosexual individuals – the differing conclusions to the composer’s demise may also provide alternatives to those with a proclivity for biographical interpretations of music, thus enriching the range of our musical experiences. Richard J. Evans provides an analogy:

⁵⁸ Richard J. Evans quotes Ranke’s term of ‘interconnectedness’. See Richard J. Evans, *In Defence of History* (London: Granta, 2018), p. 76.

⁵⁹ Wiley, *Tchaikovsky*, p. xiii.

⁶⁰ Bullock’s is perhaps the latest of Chaikovskii biographies and demonstrates that the ‘cholera’ camp prevails.

Doing historical research is rather like doing a jigsaw puzzle where the pieces are scattered all over the house in several boxes, some of which have been destroyed, and where once it is put together, a significant number of the pieces are still missing.⁶¹

Such is evident in writing the life of Chaikovskii. With missing ‘pieces’, one can only ‘fill the gaps’ with one’s own imagination to visualise the ideal that is the completed puzzle. Whilst the letter from Nadezhda fon Mekk, which most scholars have concluded to be dated 4 October 1890, remains in the state of ‘not survived’, one can only speculate on its contents, its tone, and thus the severity of its impact on Chaikovskii’s life. In this essay, I demonstrated the difference in focus and length of coverage of fon Mekk’s termination in patronage. I conclude that biographers may only offer their ‘pieces’ with caution; readers, scholars, and biographers are left to make their own decisions on which ‘pieces’ to use (i.e., which narrative to believe).

Without new discoveries, it is perhaps difficult to ascertain whether the life of Chaikovskii will once again be retold and re-evaluated. However, if, as Joanne Cormac claims, musicologists have ‘begun to acknowledge biography’s potential as a barometer of cultural and social values and tastes’, then inflammatory remarks and inane labels might perhaps be hurled less often in the academic sphere.⁶²

⁶¹ Evans, *In Defence of History*, p. 89.

⁶² Joanne Cormac, ‘Introduction: Music and Biography,’ *19th Century Music* 44, 2 (2020), 61–66 (p. 64).

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