

Conversation / The Tchaikovsky Performers

BY KENNETH LAFAVE



This month concludes *The Tchaikovsky Experience: A Philharmonic Festival*, a survey of the music of one of America's most frequently performed Romantic-era symphonists, Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky. In last month's Conversation, the musicians who are performing with the Orchestra discussed the divide between this composer's popular appeal and his critical reception. This month Kenneth LaFave talks to the performers about their interpretations of this master's works.

Tchaikovsky was tortured by the fact of his homosexuality; some say he deliberately contracted cholera in order to die and so escape exposure of his orientation. In a score such as his final composition, the Symphony No. 6, *Pathétique*, his life and music seem to merge. Is this important to you as performers?

Ludovic Morlot: With certain composers, you are aware of the biography. This is true with Schumann, for example, and Mahler. Tchaikovsky is on that list also. It is

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important to me to be aware of his life as you play his music.

Lorin Maazel: For me, it's totally irrelevant.

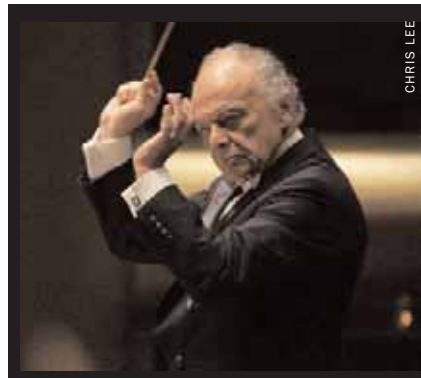
Nationalism is an important aspect of 19th-century music. How pertinent is the fact that Tchaikovsky draws on the Russian folk tradition?

Maazel: Well, my teacher was Russian and was very, very fond of Tchaikovsky's music and obviously grew up in that tradition — the tradition of Russian music. And so Tchaikovsky's music was like mother's milk to me.

Simon Trpčeski (who performed last month): Maybe because I am a Slavic person, Tchaikovsky is very close to my heart. I was always taught to keep the real taste of his music in my performances. As much as you put your own interpretation on his pieces, it's important to remember that the basis of his music is the Russian soul, the Russian folk tradition.

Johannes Moser: Nationalism is not a factor for me. One of my teachers said, "Notes don't know where they come from." I look at what the notes want, and of course I put them into a context. But I don't stop to think, "It's Romantic music, I must put a lot of rubato in it." If you bring context in too early, that can overshadow a few things you might otherwise see. What Tchaikovsky listened to, what he liked or disliked, these are secondary things.

Morlot: Tchaikovsky actually combines the Russian folk elements with the great German tradition. The first movement of the *Pathétique* is very German in sound and form, nothing less than extended sonata form. By the way, I think the word "Pathétique" here indicates "passionate," not "pity." I don't think Tchaikovsky was mad about the name, but it remains. His original plan was to call it "Programmatic Symphony." But then he thought, "People will want to know the program," and he didn't want them to know.



Lorin Maazel presides over *The Tchaikovsky Experience*



Johannes Moser joins the Philharmonic for the *Rococo Variations*, October 10–11, 13

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Conversation



Tchaikovsky's music is filled with contrast; more so than classical-era pieces, of course, but also more than the work of his contemporaries, such as Brahms.

Janine Jansen: The first movement of the Violin Concerto goes straight to the heart. It grabs you and takes you on this journey, and a very meaningful journey, I would say. And then the second movement is a moment of complete relaxation, just heaven. Even though it's incredibly short, it's one of the most beautiful melodies ever written.

We've come full circle in our discussion, which focused last month on why this composer is loved by some and hated by others for the same reason: the ease and directness of his tunesmithing.

Maazel: Viewing a composer negatively because of his ability to write a tune that is accessible is born of envy. A genius can't help but write a great melody. It just pours forth.

Composer Kenneth LaFave writes about music for a variety of publications.



Ludovic Morlot conducts the Symphony No. 6, *Pathétique*, October 16

Janine Jansen performs the Violin Concerto, October 3–6

BY THE NUMBERS

By the conclusion of *The Tchaikovsky Experience: A Philharmonic Festival*, the Orchestra will have chalked up — including concerts by one of its forebears, the New York Symphony — an impressive number of performances of each of the composer's works that are being performed in the festival.

Symphony No. 3, <i>Polish</i>	16
Symphony No. 1, <i>Winter Dreams</i>	20
<i>Manfred Symphony</i>	36
Symphony No. 2, <i>Little Russian</i>	69
<i>Rococo Variations</i>	46
Selections from <i>Swan Lake</i>	114
Piano Concerto No. 1	172
Violin Concerto	223
Symphony No. 6, <i>Pathétique</i>	317
Symphony No. 4	402
Symphony No. 5	403

This Orchestra gave the world premiere of the composer's Piano Concerto No. 2 in 1881, as well the U.S. premieres of 11 other Tchaikovsky scores, including *Romeo and Juliet* and the Symphonies Nos. 2, 3, 4 and 6.