Tchaikovsky: Symphony No. 6 (*Pathétique*)

Timothy L. Jackson

The College of Music
The University of North Texas

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"Pathetic" metaphors for sexuality and race, gambling and destiny

Perhaps no musical work remains more shrouded in controversy than the Sixth Symphony of Pyotr Ilyitch Tchaikovsky. With regard to the symphony's intrinsic quality, Tchaikovsky himself had no doubts, placing it at the pinnacle of his achievement. To his brother Anatoly he wrote: "I'm very proud of the symphony, and think it's the best of my works." To Vladimir "Bob" Davidov, the dedicatee, he professed that "I definitely consider it the best and, in particular, the most sincere of all my works. I love it as I have never loved any other of my musical offspring."[1] On 30 October, two days after the St. Petersburg premiere, at which the symphony was accorded a polite, bewildered if not hostile reception, Tchaikovsky reiterated his faith in the work to his publisher Jurgenson: "As far as I myself am concerned, I take more pride in it than in any other of my works."[2] Then, a mere nine days after the premiere of this clearly tragic *Symphonie Pathétique*, the composer was dead.

One of the aspects that has to be taken into account when considering the reception of any work of art or music is the role of the creator's own propaganda about it. In preparation for the premiere, Tchaikovsky let it be known that his new symphony had a program, a "sincere," "autobiographical" program, "highly subjective," which he nevertheless declined to reveal. But surely this "secret" program was not really secret at all: the French title "*Pathétique*," with its connotation of the "forbidden" *grande passion pathétique* of French opera, the public dedication to Bob, and the composer's provocative reticence as to the programmatic specifics were part of a bold – even audacious – propaganda campaign to reveal *de facto* the putatively "secret" program; it was strategically designed to alert friends and even the wider public that the subject of the new symphony was the composer's "unmentionable" love for Bob. This propagandizing effort ensured the work's posthumous success: the com-

poser's sudden death, putatively by suicide, fortuitously made homosexual passion acceptable; now, the symphonic program could become a homily for the expiation of homosexual "guilt" through suicide.

Was this last symphony a kind of musical suicide note, a personal requiem, as was widely believed after the second, posthumous performance? These questions, raised at the dawn of this century, have continued to exercise modern Tchaikovsky scholarship. Indeed the debate between those scholars who believe that the composer committed suicide as decreed by a "court of honor" of his peers at the School of Jurisprudence (Orlova, Brown, and Holden) and those who maintain that he died naturally from cholera as stated in the official reports (Poznansky, Taruskin, some of the current archivists at Klin, and others) has become especially heated in recent years.[3] In the absence of definitive scientific data – the kind of information which could only be provided by an exhumation and modern scientific investigation of the remains – the cause of Tchaikovsky's death must remain an open question. But even a negative result in tests for traces of poison would not put the question to rest since Tchaikovsky might have committed suicide by deliberately drinking unboiled water. The rumors of suicide – especially the story of the "court of honor" – now have become so much a part of the reception history of the *Pathétique* that they deserve consideration as such.

An analysis of a piece of music is, by nature, a hypothesis. Its *raison d'être* is that it has something new to say, that it illuminates the composition, that it causes it to be perceived in a more profound way than previously. There is no absolute proof for the rectitude of any interpretation. Recognizing the truth of this observation, however, does not amount to an unconditional endorsement of relativism or a surrender to the belief that "anything goes"; nor does it give the "green light" to an interpretative free-for-all. On the contrary, it is an *invitation* to construct sensitive analysis-based interpretation founded upon careful review of "the facts." In addition to being hypothetical, an interpretation of the semantic contents of a work like Tchaikovsky's *Pathétique* is bound to be controversial because of the homosexual dimension. At a time when homosexuality is still outlawed in many parts of the world, when – in spite of great progress toward tolerance – we still have a long way to go to ensure that homosexuals receive fair and proper treatment in society, a book that deals with such issues as homosexuality and race, and their

impact upon famous pieces, is bound to touch a nerve. It is important, then, to observe at the outset that although the present interpretation considers Tchaikovsky's homosexuality to be a "negative" force in his spiritual-tonal cosmology, this does not in any way endorse the homophobic position that homosexuality *per se* is wrong or evil. The revisionist view of Tchaikovsky's homosexuality as "unproblematic" has resonated well – perhaps too well – with those who rightly wish to see homosexuals "normalized" in our own society. But however welcome recent portrayals of Tchaikovsky as "happy homosexual" may be today, their historical accuracy remains controversial; most importantly, as I shall attempt to show, this revisionist position is *not* borne out by the music – especially by the Sixth Symphony.

Tchaikovsky's music suggests many things which, when viewed closely from our present vantage point, will make us uncomfortable. For example, the plot of the last opera *Iolanta* (1891) resonates with the idea that the "anomaly" is a "medical condition" requiring a "cure"; there is a substantial body of evidence – both external and internal – that a number of Tchaikovsky's major works, including the last three symphonies, present this fateful "anomaly" as an ultimately terminal condition – as an incurable "disease" – which, in the "autobiographical" Sixth Symphony, culminates in the demise of the homosexual lovers (Tchaikovsky and his nephew). As George L. Mosse observes in *The Creation of Modern Masculinity*:

> Moral sickness and physical sickness were thought to be identical, for moral sickness left its imprint on the body and face, as Oscar Wilde sought to demonstrate so dramatically in *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1890). The avant-garde, which openly attacked the morals and manners of society, was seen in this light, as were all the others who menaced the settled order of things. Physicians took the initiative in ratifying the equation between morality, health, and sickness, partly because this was expected of them and partly because they themselves gained status as the arbiters of established norms. Physicians lent their medical authority to the creation of the moral and physical stereotype of the outsider, whether it be the so-called racially inferior, emancipated women, Jews, or homosexuals.[4]

In my opinion, we must be prepared to acknowledge that Tchaikovsky's highly negative view of a putatively ideal homosexual relationship is profoundly influenced by this late nineteenth-century

ideology of homosexuality as a moral and physical "disease" even if it severely jars our modern sensibilities (I shall discuss the homosexual "sickness" metaphor in Tchaikovsky's last three symphonies in Chapter 4).

Let us not discount the possibility that Tchaikovsky was comfortable with his homosexuality in practice, as the "no-problem" theorists have maintained, problematizing it solely in the realm of art. Additionally, the "problem" camp may well have imposed the message of the music upon the life – and the death. In other words, although the Sixth Symphony does intimate a fatal outcome to the relationship between the composer and his nephew, this program does not *prove* that they applied the symphony's dire message to themselves. The inference of suicide drawn shortly after the first performances of the Sixth Symphony and Tchaikovsky's sudden death under "mysterious" circumstances may be false (but one keeps coming back to the troublesome fact that Tchaikovsky referred to the Sixth Symphony as "*autobiographical*"). I shall propose that, *in the music* at least – and, when all is said and done, it is the music that matters – Tchaikovsky *predicts* that the relationship with Bob will have dire consequences. Whether the lovers are destroyed by others or others become instruments of their own deaths remains undetermined (I hope to show that on one level at least, the music intimates crucifixion). Unequivocally clear, however, is the character of the Sixth Symphony as a tragic "*Eros*-symphony."

In the last decades of the nineteenth century and the first of the twentieth century, artists, writers, and composers began to address "difficult" issues with a directness that was essentially new. Although Tchaikovsky referred to the program of the *Pathétique* (his own title) as "secret," in fact its homo-erotic content was made as explicit as possible by the dedication to Bob, and by many other purely musical factors; and this programmatic substance was tactfully recognized (like the composer's homosexuality itself) by Tchaikovsky's immediate circle and widely suspected by the broader public. During approximately two years of gestation (1891–93), this "not-so-secret" program of the Sixth Symphony evolved into an erotic drama of doomed homosexual love richly adorned with intertextual references to opera, specifically to Wagner's *Tristan*, Bizet's *Carmen*, and Tchaikovsky's own operas, especially the last two, *The Queen of Spades* (1890) and *Iolanta* (1891), and a number of earlier

works including the Overture *Romeo and Juliet* in its various incarnations (1869, 1870, and 1880) and ballet *Swan Lake* (1875–76).

The "operatic" character of the symphony was already astutely noted in the review of the premiere by Tchaikovsky's friend, the music critic Hermann Laroche. From 1875 on (after seeing *Carmen* and the *Ring*), Tchaikovsky was profoundly engaged with both Bizet and Wagner – and with the Schopenhauerian ideology that inspires Wagner's art: his music embodies his *intuitive* response to Bizet, Wagner, and Schopenhauer. Tchaikovsky's relationship to Bizet and Wagner was dialectical: toward Bizet and a number of other contemporary French composers (especially Delibes), he was favorably inclined, while his attitude to Wagner remained critical. Tchaikovsky's favorable orientation toward French opera and ballet accords perfectly with the generally Francophile sympathies of Russian culture in the nineteenth century.

Rejecting the efforts of the revisionists to deproblematize Tchaikovsky's *Eros*-symphony, I will propose that Tchaikovsky's love-death *topos* (as in Wagner's *Tristan*) – which is realized in a number of other works spanning his career – concerns unbridgeable disjunctions: between the unorthodox (read "homosexual") and orthodox (read "heterosexual") worlds, between the demands of love on the one hand and morality, society, and religion on the other.[5] I will further argue that both the Sixth Symphony and *Iolanta* constitute interrelated tropes on *Tristan*, proposing antipodal yet mutually illuminating solutions to the *Tristan* dilemma. If remaining critical of Wagner, Tchaikovsky himself nevertheless acknowledged Wagner's profound influence, remarking that "I admit I might have composed differently had Wagner never existed" (an admission with which Brahms too could have sympathized). As in *Tristan*, the overall *Eros*-narrative in the *Pathétique* plays out the lovers' unbearable longing springing from their forced separation, their ecstatic union, and their deaths, which are compelled by Destiny in view of the impossibility of their homosexual-"incestuous" relationship from religious, social, moral, and – as I shall argue – (Platonic) philosophical standpoints.

When the nineteenth century approached the "difficult" topics of homosexuality, racism, and religious bigotry in tragic, high art, these issues were generally addressed metaphorically. (For a long time, such topics had been more directly ridiculed in comic, low art.) Nineteenth-

century artists and composers enciphered their serious treatment of these issues in a semiotic code, which was tacitly understood by performers and public alike. In the course of the twentieth century we have become accustomed to discussing these "difficult" topics more openly, and are therefore less familiar with the code; this study attempts to break the code and play the game in the late nineteenth-century way. The fundamental yet unwritten rule was that "unacceptable" topics not be aired too openly in high art; rather, considered from a semiotic perspective, the unacceptable signified was better dressed up as a legitimate signifier; thus, homosexuals could historicize themselves, sporting Classical Greek garb in idyllic antique décor, and Jews were free to cloak themselves as "exotic" Gypsies, Huguenots, or Brahmins. Perhaps the first engagement in high art with the "difficult" issues of homosexuality and race occurred in France, where homosexuality had been somewhat fashionable since the later eighteenth century and Jews, emancipated by Napoleon in the early 1800s, had suddenly entered mainstream society.

Armed with the algorithms of this semiotic code, we can begin to probe more deeply the "troubling" aspects of Tchaikovsky's construction of his fate-decreed homosexuality in his music. Those who seek to confine the homosexual aspect to surface structure in Tchaikovsky are barking up the wrong tree; rather, homosexual composers rooted in the Western tradition were not inclined to express their issues in superficialities; these masters created their tragic high art through provocative engagement with their own "fateful" sexual, racial, religious, and gambling "vices" at a much more profound level of musical discourse, this *engagement* (in an existential sense) tending to be deep structural and metaphorical rather than solely lexical in nature.

Tchaikovsky's choice of the French title "*Pathétique*" for his last symphony strategically sights the work in the topical field of French opera rather than Beethoven's Sonata Op. 13.[6] Although Beethoven's symphonic music provided an important formal model for Tchaikovsky's symphonies (see Chapter 3), French music was much more to his taste (as he said in a letter to Nadezhda von Meck, he feared Beethoven as he feared God, but did not love him).[7] The French title squarely places the *Pathétique* in the tradition of grand opera's *engagement* with "difficult" relationships; in this tradition, "forbidden" *grande passion* was frequently interracial, namely between a "white" European and a woman of

racially "dubious" origins, the tragic *dénouement* generally resulting in the suicide of one or both lovers.[8] Bizet's *Carmen* (1875), Tchaikovsky's favorite contemporary opera, participates in French opera's treatment of "problematic" – i.e. *pathétique* – interracial relationships. One of Carmen's antecedents is the Black Selika in Meyerbeer's *L'Africaine* (1865), while her Indian and Japanese successors are Lakmé in Delibes's opera of that title (1883), and Cio-Cio-San in Puccini's *Madame Butterfly* (1904, an Italian opera profoundly indebted to this essentially French tradition).[9]

In the last three operas, Passion tempts and ultimately provokes Destiny by daring to cross racial boundaries: the racially "inferior" woman becomes involved in a "forbidden" relationship with a white man; and when he inevitably discards her for the white woman, she commits suicide. In Tchaikovsky's semiotic game of substituting heterosexual for homosexual signifiers, the "*Pathétique*" of French operatic interracial passion becomes his own homosexual passion: in his "Impassioned Symphony" (the French title being crucial to this revaluation) – the *homosexually* stigmatized relationship is substituted for the *racially* stigmatized relationships of French opera. That this transmutation was immediately recognized is revealed by reception history: when composers of the next generation "received" Tchaikovsky's *Pathétique*, they "resolved" its homosexual passion back to the heterosexual but interracial model of the French operatic tradition. Thus, this reconstructed interracial French metaphor informs Mahler's Tchaikovsky-influenced "meta-symphonic" discourse in his last five symphonies, which explore his interracial relationship with Alma. Berg's "passionate" cry to his *Jewish amoureuse* Hanna Fuchs-Robettin in the *Largo desolato* of his *Lyric Suite* (indebted to the *Pathétique*'s *Adagio lamentoso*) similarly refers to the French tradition through a poem which Baudelaire had originally addressed to *la Vénus noire*, the mulatto actress Jeanne Duval.

This fundamental parallelism between the semantic languages of the homosexual composer Tchaikovsky and nineteenth-century French-Jewish opera composers like Halévy, Bizet, and Meyerbeer provides an important key to the semiotic code of the *Pathétique*: just as Tchaikovsky encoded and thereby disguised homosexual messages in the ostensibly heterosexual plots of his operas, ballets, and overtures, these "French" composers employed a related process of reflexive transmutation, trans-

forming the persecuted self into a redeemed if not ennobled Other.[10] Since depicting the predicament of the contemporary Jew was too uncomfortable, "French" composers systematically metamorphosed themselves into the eternally fascinating, "exotic" (rather than dangerous) Gypsies, Blacks, and even (in strongly Catholic countries like France and Austria) Protestants.[11] Experiencing the predicament of the French Jew first-hand (being himself half-Jewish), Bizet, his wife (daughter of Jacques Francois Halévy), and her cousin Ludovic Halévy (one of the librettists for *Carmen*) could relate sympathetically to the "Gypsy" Carmen in light of this complex and certainly not unequivocal process of self-transmutation.

French painting at the beginning of the nineteenth century demonstrated astonishing boldness in representing homosexual love. For instance, in the work of Jacques Louis David (1748–1825) and his students, one of whom, Jean Broc, depicted Apollo supporting his mortally wounded youthful lover Hyacinth with surprisingly explicit homoerotic *pathos* (see Plate 1).[12] Even in "liberal" France, homosexual artists and composers were never *legally* allowed out of the closet; it was prudent to hide their issues behind elaborate metaphorical cloaks. Most important for any consideration of the role of homosexuality in nineteenth-century high art-music is to recognize that this century did not even possess a proper, non-pejorative term for homosexuality. The value judgments inherent in nineteenth-century terminology bespeak a conceptual framework in which homosexuality could only be considered negatively.[13] The value-neutral designation "homosexual," invented by the Viennese Karoly Maria Benkert, was not even in use until the turn of the century (i.e. after Tchaikovsky's death). According to conventional nineteenth-century wisdom, homosexuals, Jews, Blacks, Gypsies, compulsive gamblers, and prostitutes all had one essential thing in common: all were criminals teetering precariously on the edge of "proper" society.

Although he had achieved international recognition, Tchaikovsky was keenly sensitive to the ultimate precariousness of his social position; his anxiety finds clear expression in his letters and – I believe – his music. As David Greenberg observes in his monumental study *The Construction of Homosexuality*, "[in the nineteenth century] on the whole, homosexuality was still considered a monstrous vice."[14] Additionally, prostitution (both hetero- and homosexual) and gambling were widely considered to

Plate 1 Jean Broc, *Death of Hyacincth*, 1801

be related and avoidable "vices." In houses of ill repute, the two generally went hand in hand. The centrality of the gambling-with-Fate metaphor in *Carmen* and the ingenious way it is realized musically is also of great importance for the development of Tchaikovsky's musical thinking. The heroine commands the cards to reveal her future and, although she is resigned to their dire pronouncement, her questioning *per se* nev-

ertheless constitutes a form of gambling, i.e. it is an attempt to cheat Fate by learning the outcome of events before they transpire. For this impertinence (perhaps more than for interracial promiscuity or disloyalty) the sentence is death.[15]

The seminal idea of *Carmen* – "gambling with Destiny" – is taken up by Tchaikovsky in *The Queen of Spades* and the *Pathétique*. In these works, the protagonists audaciously challenge Destiny – to a game whether of cards or of "forbidden" homosexual love makes little difference – which they (falsely) believe is stacked in their favor. By indulging in the associated "vices" of gambling and "forbidden" sex, and by attempting to circumvent Destiny, Fate's bluff is called; its response is death: to "stack the deck," Fate intervenes in the process of "shuffling," thereby tricking and destroying the lovers. As I shall attempt to show, this fundamental idea of Fate's "double-cross" (pun intended) is composed into the deep structure of the music of *Carmen*, *The Queen of Spades*, and the *Pathétique* in a number of dimensions, most strikingly through the metaphor of the "tricked" or "broken" sequences in the tonal and formal domains. There are indications that Tchaikovsky associated the putatively "sinful" compulsions of gambling with homosexuality since in the Kamenka Diary of 1884 the references to them seem to be linked.[16] Since Tchaikovsky was both a compulsive vint player and an active homosexual, his feelings about his homosexual urges may have been intimately connected with his emotions at cards. In *The Queen of Spades*, he subtly associates the "vices" of homosexuality with gambling: the "good" girl Lisa offers herself to Hermann, who misogynistically renounces her to run off to the gambling house.

Many writers have rightly called attention to the centrality of the concept of Fate (*Fatum*) in Tchaikovsky's work. In this book, this contention is supported by a new *aperçu*, namely that the concept of malevolent Fate is worked into the structure of Tchaikovsky's *Pathétique* (and other related works) in two dimensions: firstly, through the use of tritonally "broken" sequences of fifths, and secondly, by means of formal disruptions created by "diachronic transformations" (to be defined shortly). The sequence of descending or ascending perfect fifths becomes a metaphor for the inexorable unfolding of Destiny since one link in the chain "predetermines" the next, the "circle" of fifths paralleling in the tonal domain the turning "wheel" of Fortune. If the circle of

fifths unfolds diatonically from C, it "stumbles" upon the tritone B–F, which the theorists designated "the devil in music" ("diabolus in musica"). I shall argue that, in Tchaikovsky and his most important model – Bizet's *Carmen* – the sequence of perfect fifths may be "broken" or "challenged" by the tritone and by sequences of tritones which, drawing upon the tritone's diabolical connotations, represent "difficult" aspects of sexuality and race.

The second trilogy of Tchaikovsky symphonies can be understood to participate in a "Meta-Symphony" or meta-symphonic discourse. There is a clear line of demarcation between the first and last three numbered symphonies; the earlier works are "Russian" or "abstract" in character, while the later symphonies are closely related testimonials of a personal and self-revelatory nature (as we have seen, Tchaikovsky himself referred to his Sixth Symphony as "autobiographical" and "highly subjective"). The Fourth Symphony can be said to mark the "turning point" or "crisis" in Tchaikovsky's career as a symphonist, initiating the large-scale, meta-symphonic narrative concerning the "anomaly." In this narrative spanning Symphonies Nos. 4–6, the Sixth Symphony becomes the *dénouement*.

To support this interpretation of the Sixth Symphony, the book analyzes the *Pathétique* in the larger context of the meta-symphonic discourse spanning Symphonies Nos. 4–6, Tchaikovsky's oeuvre as a whole, and European music at the turn of the century. This contextualization will enable us to decode and disentangle the complex web of semantic meanings woven into the symphony's tonal and formal fabric. The second chapter presents the historical background for the *Pathétique*'s genesis and composition, placing it in the context of Tchaikovsky's biography and creative activities in the early 1890s. The third chapter provides a detailed formal and tonal analysis, which orients the reader for the detailed exposé of the putatively "secret" program in the fourth chapter. Since sketch study is most illuminating *after* a work has been thoroughly analyzed, the investigation of the sketches and short score for the Sixth Symphony is postponed until Chapter 5; now the examination of the work's compositional genesis in the sketchbook can be illuminated by interpretative insights gleaned in earlier chapters. The sixth chapter focuses on the reception of this innovative work. Shortly after its second performance, the *Pathétique* enjoyed huge

success throughout Europe and America, perhaps not least because of the whiff of scandal associated with the composer's death. It quickly became a "landmark" of Western music, and exercised a considerable influence on composers of the next generation, most notably Mahler, but also Rakhmaninov, Berg, and possibly Sibelius and Britten. It is noteworthy that, in a Nazi revaluation, the *Pathétique* enjoyed new popularity in the late thirties, the March becoming an allegory for the resurgence of the "New Germany," and the concluding *Adagio lamentoso* a *Heldenklage*. The book concludes by considering the account of the Court of Judgement purely as reception history and the parallels it evokes between Tchaikovsky and Plato's Socrates, who was similarly accused of "corrupting youth," condemned by an Athenian court, and forced to commit suicide. The parallelism with Socrates suggested by the story of the secret judgement reinforces the interpretation of Tchaikovsky's masterpiece as a hymn to the Platonic conception of love as a form of divine, yet fatal madness.