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Tchaikovsky's Grand Sonata (Interpreter's notes)

Abstract

The article is dedicated to the Grand Sonata of P. Tchaikovsky. The author introduces and exposes a prominent opinion of this work established in the West. The material contains citations and excerpts from the publications of selected Western critics, including D. Brown and A.E.F. Dickinson, as well as a brief analytical summary of the piece, based on the personal performing experience of the author and on the comparison between the pianistic and orchestral approaches in the interpretation of the Sonata.

Key words: Tchaikovsky, criticism, sonata, form, analysis, prejudice.

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Аннотация:

В статье предложен исполнительский анализ Большой сонаты П. И. Чайковского. Приводя многочисленные цитаты из работ таких влиятельных западных критиков, как Д. Браун и А. Е. Ф. Дикинсон, автор показывает устоявшиеся в западной музыкальной критике воззрения на это сочинение. Вместе с тем, руководствуясь собственным исполнительским опытом, автор высказывает свою – отличную от сложившейся – точку зрения, а также предлагает сравнительный анализ «пианистической» и «оркестровой» интерпретаций Большой сонаты.

Ключевые слова: Чайковский, критика, соната, форма, анализ, предвзятость.

I decided to write about the Grand Sonata because this work is very dear to me, and is painfully overlooked and underestimated in musical circles. I have been performing it since I was fourteen, and I still discover freshness in long-loved nuances and am still swept by this work's power. Never have I met a piece of music that would serve as such a direct barometer of a performer's inner honesty and dedication as this sonata, and it is my goal to spark an interest that would eventually propel this work to a more respectable position with the elevated

status that it truly deserves.

The Grand Sonata was written between the months of March and August of 1878 in Geneva, during one of the most turbulent and embarrassing years for Tchaikovsky. Several months before commencing work on the Sonata, Tchaikovsky attempted suicide and suffered a nervous breakdown following the terrible realization of marital dread ahead of him; the attempt was covered up by his friends and family, and he was sent abroad without his wife to recuperate in solitude. In February,

he wrote to his brother, Anatoly, “Only now, when I am completely recovered, have I learned to relate objectively to everything that I did during my brief insanity. That man...wasn’t I...”¹ As for the Sonata, he writes, “for the first time in my life, I have begun to work on a new piece before finishing the one in hand,”² showing that he lacked the “supernatural, incomprehensible force...which is called inspiration.”³ The first performance was given by Nikolai Rubinstein, October 21, 1879, an event deeply moving to Tchaikovsky.

Born in Votkinsk, a heavily industrial town 600 miles east of Moscow, Tchaikovsky had his first musical impressions drawn from the orchestra, a mechanical organ that produced excerpts mostly from Italian operas. As insignificant as it might seem, the elaborate melodies of Bellini, Rossini and Donizetti may have penetrated the young soul of Tchaikovsky deeper than any later influence. As he developed a taste for the art of cantilena and belcanto, he recollected, “At the age of seventeen I made the acquaintance of an Italian singing teacher named <Luigi> Piccioli. He was the first person who took an interest in my musical inclinations, and he gained great influence over me.” Famous for her aria in Bellini’s *Norma*, Italian singer Emma Lagrú had been visited by Tchaikovsky and his close friend, Apukhtin, who insisted on her singing *Casta Diva* after she had fallen ill and had to cancel her performance the previous night; she sang for them knowing that they were her most faithful fans. This fondness for Italian music inundated Tchaikovsky’s esthetics, giving him a special sense of proportion — in my opinion, this sense is not in the geometrical, Greek way, where the stigma of symmetry and grandeur overpowers simplicity, but to be found in a kinder, Romanic way, where human feelings are cherished and expressed with the utmost warmth, in the way that appeals to any aspects of love and welcomes its open manifestation, and most importantly, in the way that always finds the most graceful form and leaves an aftertaste of beauty.

Although influenced by Italian opera, the essence of Tchaikovsky’s music lies deeply within Russian folklore; it is not fairytale based and sophisticated as Rimsky-Korsakov’s music, it is not a potent mix of Slavic and Oriental tunes like Borodin’s music, nor is it the raw uncompromising pessimism of Mussorgsky. He truly loved everything Russian,⁴ and while growing up in the “backwoods,” he “soaked up the indescribable beauty of Russian folk music’s characteristic traits.” One must find an outlet for self-expression somehow, and Tchaikovsky, while socially insecure and discussed by herds of suspicious people, felt that his best communication happened through music. Extremely sensitive to the beauty of nature, he felt most comfortable and creative being surrounded by the gigantic space of Russian fields reflected in endless melodic sweeps and the esthetic of development aimed at embracing the large distances of Russia and its uninhibited glory. He writes, “Mountains are very fine, but it’s very difficult for a Russian to stand their overwhelming grandeur for long. I am dying for a plain, for a boundless, distant prospect, for an expanse of open country, and for wide horizons.”⁵ This description can be the key to his life-long psychological portrait.

Structurally, the first movement is written in a sonata form with some elements of a rondo, incorporating a march-like section that returns four times; first, it is as an introduction, second, it appears before the first episode/connecting theme, then it comes before the second theme in the recapitulation, and appears for the last time in the conclusion of the movement.

The form of the second movement calls for a certain flexibility of analysis and depends on a particular point of view; it, too, has rondo elements being essentially a theme with variations. The theme of sixteen measures is followed by a short episode, and a first variation, and then the large episode begins in C major and modulates into E major which leads to the second variation. There is the short episode that previously appeared following the return of the theme, which

is significantly expanded and leads to a climax before the coda. My own vision of this form tends to unify as much musical material as possible, citing particularly sections that contain the same material but are presented in different texture or register. Rather than separating the theme and the first variation with a short episode, it is possible to imagine all three elements as a large single section with continuous development, and basically the same musical material; even the short episode is based on the dotted rhythm that signifies the theme. Thus, the C major episode becomes the only significant interruption and change of mood, before the main section returns in a slightly varied, but essentially similar way.

The third movement, Scherzo, has an ABA structure with a coda after the Perfect Authentic Cadence — its repetitiveness requires wit and humor from a performer and can become a highly characteristic music if inspired by specific scenes. For example, the feeling of an accelerating sleigh being pulled by horses with a blizzard lashing in one's face, or an exciting game outside that has its own unrehearsed but precise choreography, based on pushing and pulling, nearly a dance, but with a slight awkwardness and roughness in its movements, are all pictures that come to mind in this movement. The middle section resembles a dance even more strongly with its symmetrical rises and falls, but there is an uncontrollable sense of gravity each time the passage hurries downwards, which allows for acceleration. Here, Tchaikovsky manages to create a lyrical balance with a couple of uprising motives — remarkable considering its fast tempo.

The fourth movement is in rondo form, which also has elements of sonata form (the opposite of the first movement); as in the first movement, the main section returns four times. There is not enough distance between the supposed 'first' theme of quirky and anxious nature and the supposed 'second' theme of lyrical stance for the form to be a fully-grown sonata form, and the development section bears no resemblance to any of the previous material of the movement,

thus becoming an episode.

It is in the hands of the performer in which the challenge lies to deliver such a structure with progressive pressure and the persuasion of genuine sincerity. Fundamental things are generally simple and sometimes simple things are the most difficult to convey in music, due to the burdens of analysis rather than feelings that are inherent in any profession. As much as Tchaikovsky succeeded in the operatic genre, his music is far from being theatrical in its expression, especially in this Sonata. In order to understand the necessity of complete openness which borders on confessional sincerity, one should look into some nationalistic characteristics like the two features kin to the Russian character that have been represented in literature and complement each other: the idea of a "petty person" and the idea of pity. A "petty person" is meek, oppressed by either stronger individuals or fate, and yet caring and sensitive, summarized in one word: selfless. The sentiment of pity frees the soul from any rust of pragmatism and stretches the boundaries of compassion. These two features bring the listener along the path of tracing the composer's impulses in this music rather than on the path of dry analysis and comparative judgment. The falling motion in the second theme (Ex. 1) illustrates the lamentations of the "petty person" attempting to rise but falling down where slurs translate literally into sighs; the ascending interval of a minor second stays in the listener's memory until it appears several measures later in the first of several *Dies Irae* motive appearances, this time descending (Ex. 3).

Back in 1878, Russia was already a part of European culture, assimilating some European influences and widening its sense of perspective with cultural exchange, Russia's nature and spirit have not been fundamentally altered. In order to appreciate its art, it is necessary to know the origins of the impulses that propelled this art to appear. For example, the "wide horizons" image translates into a liberating feeling of having no spatial, and therefore no inner, limitations, which

would guide a listener's imagination through a large compositional scheme. Thus, often the structure of a melody in Tchaikovsky's music consists of several shorter motifs and a larger conclusive motive that allows said melody to travel over large distances of musical plains

1



2



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There is a certain difference in the approach to form and content in Western and Russian Romantic music that can be summarized by the question "Which comes first?" In general, Western music has a clearly defined structure and set of proportions, whereas Russian music tends to grasp emotional substance and commit to it while defying structural boundaries. Such diverse approaches sometimes complement each other and can be mutually useful, yet the example of the Grand Sonata's fate shows that fundamental differences are formed within an indi-

vidual's upbringing and environment, and cannot be resolved easily. Nevertheless, these differences can be brought to a compromise that would allow one's views to be appreciated by the other. In this piece content finds its form, and therefore it cannot be measured by set standards, or, as Tchaikovsky put it himself, "Only by strenuous labour have I at last succeeded in making the form in my compositions correspond, more or less, with their contents."⁶

According to Henry Zajaczkowski, Tchaikovsky's developmental techniques "never

intended to sound like smoothly progressing musical arguments, but were specifically designed as enforced hiatuses in the overall musical structure," "juxtaposed blocks," and a "startling amalgamation of two blocks of disparate material." He points out the specific technique of Tchaikovsky's "cunningly constructed build-up of tension" which results in a "climax of sometimes overwhelming force."

The length of the Grande Sonata is close to forty minutes, slightly on the long side, but still within conventional standards; yet the fact that its effect on listener is one of a much larger piece presents obvious challenges for the performer. The nature of the piano is dual, utilizing both strings and hammers, and it is limited in sustaining sound. Therefore, something that an orchestra would present with ease would require an out-of-the-ordinary treatment of the piano. The Grand Sonata proves it, because the whole approach to technique is different in this piece. Instead of thinking in conventional-size contrasting sections which define sonata form, in which every part has beginning, development and either a connection to the next part or closure, this sonata stands tall on its massive sound support and covers the birth of an idea, its travels and changes across a complete movement, with the help of a recurring refrain in a march form in a three-quarter meter. As a repeated element in a very lengthy movement, this march-like episode can be perceived as a lack of inspiration, if played without one; this is where the quality and conviction of the performer and the performance plays a crucial role. The march stays unchanged on purpose, representing one of those things in life which we call core values, and for Tchaikovsky, it is almighty hope. Someone like him, with no sense of self-worth, kind to a fault, teary and suicidal, had to struggle enormously through the debris of his own misery to find such strength and make a universal statement out of it. The pedal plays a crucial role in delivering this statement, because not only does it connect the chords all over the keyboard, but it creates reverberation and the il-

lusion of a bigger instrument. It also accentuates the metrical structure of a march: one should not "clean up" the pedal if it mixes a bit from one harmony to another on a painter's palette, and one should distinguish messy from massive to preserve the colossal build-up of sound.

Tchaikovsky's orchestration is symbolic and intuitive, yet direct; symbolic are the sounds that convey a message, for he has clear meaning for each instrument: the strings are for cherishing lament and extracting immeasurable pain, the brass delivers raw force and vehemence while the woodwinds range from explicit lyricism to wicked silliness; intuitive is his approach which suggests none of the artificial planning for all of these effects, and direct is the effect itself when it hits the target⁷.

The first chords of the march have a dense voice distribution and a sharp dotted rhythm to provide decisiveness that strikes one as being the brass section in an orchestral tutti and as the march grows, another aspect links it to the orchestra, namely its registration (Ex.4).

4

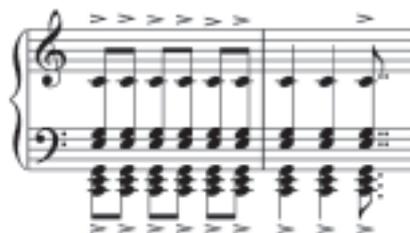
Moderato e risoluto

The massive chords which are spread apart continue in the same dotted rhythm, as if all it took to produce these grand sonorities was a simple gesture from the conductor (Ex.5).

5

Transitioning into the development, repeated C major chords represent the trombones in their full glory and must have an equally piercing but sustained sound to resemble this brass, otherwise the performer will produce a dull and deafeningly percussive effect (Ex.6).

6



Another example with definite trombone tone occurs in the second movement (Ex.7).

For a performer, the whole approach to the piano as an instrument should be drastically different. Instead of using its percussive and string qualities, one should look for a wide array of timbres, existent and imaginative; even an obvious instrumentation sometimes turns out to be unfit for conveying the slightest nuances of

mood and instead needs to be imagined. This kind of hypothetical instrumentation can be created and used to precisely deliver an imaginary combination of sounds, e.g. the second movement's third return of theme (m.79) originally can be perceived as a partnership of a violin as the melody and a harp as the accompaniment. In my opinion, these apparent instrumentation choices make the whole episode generally melancholic, accessible and ordinary, a common trap in understanding Tchaikovsky. There is always a breaking quality to his lyricism, one that turns a lonely melody into a crying voice, a simple accompaniment into an impervious necessity, and a generally defined melancholy into a stinging reality that everyone understands. As a solution within this episode, I suggest first to separate the tiniest motivic strands of the accompaniment by the chromatic elements through each chromatic change, then, to find polyphony between the bass line and the last notes of each ascending passage, and only afterwards to add the melody without sacrificing all of the newfound nuances (Ex.8).



8



Every performer will find his own unique instrumentation following such detailed approach. Not only it is important to understand this music's symphonic nature as it enriches piano and gives different dimension to the form, it makes it possible to understand Tchaikovsky's nature and him being, as Stravinsky said, "the most Russian of all composers."⁸

It is unfortunate that some of the critique classifies the Sonata into a category of works written without inspiration, even though Tchaikovsky's own account of this piece was lukewarm and laconic; for example, David Brown, in his attempts to assess some of the qualities of the creative process of the composer, takes up the task of assigning certain reasons and passing judgment onto two of Tchaikovsky's less "popular" works when he writes, "In fact, except perhaps for the Piano Sonata, the Second Piano Concerto seems to have been the first work Tchaikovsky undertook purely as an act of will with no external stimulus except boredom at creative inactivity."⁹ Another one of David Brown's examples demonstrates an even more generalized comment, offering academic negligence towards the Sonata and delivering poisonous words of negativity in place of a careful assessment, "Structural resourcefulness which Tchaikovsky had shown in so many of his finest instrumental works before his marriage, and which had appeared so paralyzed in the Piano Sonata, is again live."¹⁰ Statements like these (and unfounded at that) provide only a denigrated opinion of the critic, and in the end do not reflect any significant insight of the work other than the recycling of basic information.

"There is no more hint of neurosis," writes A. E. F. Dickinson¹¹ in his hatred-filled essay on Tchaikovsky's treatment of the piano, "than there is in Beethoven's Second Symphony;" the author must have had some sense of psychological classification quite diverged from the norm, for this Sonata is being denied some of its most important qualities, such as obsession and anguish. The opening march appears, in full, four times during

first movement, becoming an *idée-fixe* and striking a juxtaposition of its audacious supremacy with the vulnerability of other episodes. The Dies Irae motive, first appearing in the closing theme, then becomes the main manifestation of the coda, there repeated numerously; the nature of the development section conveys a sense of desperation in its advanced stages, as all three enormous build-ups of emotional torment (marked *fff*) each grow into major culminations, following one another. The second movement is music broken in spirit, so concentrated in its desolation that other episodes sound delusional with their playful charm. Apparently, at the end of the movement, the thirty repeated chords that originate from the dynamic mark of *pppp*, and make a *diminuendo*, is an occurrence just within the norms, according to Alan Dickinson. The author continues about the first movement, "the second subject...is of small significance except its unusual keys...and the usefulness of its two phrases in development and coda..." One is left to wonder when it became fair to judge music in terms of its "usefulness," and not its meaning; however, following Dickinson's path of interest and elaborating on the details of his findings, the second subject is vital not only to the structure of the movement by carrying elements of the Dies Irae motive, but also by being a necessary oasis of human weakness and lyricism between the grand statements of the march. Sparing no mercy, Mr. Dickinson proceeds to speak about the second movement, saying, "Here is an elaborate movement damned by a lack of what we may call personal musicianship; redeemed, perhaps, by the final transformation of *c* into the original 9/8 and E minor." To Mr. Dickinson's credit, he fails to bash the theme of the second movement itself, perhaps, due to its being "short and sensitive." One of his concluding statements says, "...Tchaikovsky was not really interested in the piano or its artistic future,"¹² and it is almost true, because Tchaikovsky indeed had his main success and fame deriving from his symphonic and vocal works. But this Sonata, in particular,

shows that his peculiar “disinterest” was beneficial in terms of largely expanding possibilities of the piano, and it contributed to its future in a way that no other piece of similar scale did. The sonata, as a genre, received a new perspective which permits various, even opposing interpretations of the word that may include elements of rondo form, scope of concerto or symphonic structure, or freedom of fantasy.

In conclusion, I would like to note that the greatest quality that makes this Sonata so special is its uncompromising nature, be it its size, intensity of developmental waves, or stubborn reinstatement of musical material; its nature does not bend to become smoother and more accessible and instead transcends the usual expectations, exposing the soul in the search for authenticity.

5. *Brown D.* Op. cit. P. 172.
6. *Strutte W.* Op. cit. P. 151.
7. *Newmarch R.* The life and letters of Peter Ilich Tchaikovsky. New York, 1973. P. 281.
In a letter to N. F. von Meck, Tchaikovsky writes, “You ask me how I manage my instrumentation. I never compose in the abstract; that is to day, the musical thought never appears otherwise than in a suitable external form... I invent the musical idea and the instrumentation simultaneously.”
8. *Volkoff V.* Tchaikovsky: a self-portrait. P. 19.
9. *Brown D.* Tchaikovsky: The years of wandering (1878–1885). Vol. 3. New York : London, 1986. P. 81.
10. *Ibid.* P. 86.
11. *Abraham G.* The music of Tchaikovsky. New York, 1946. P. 121.
12. *Ibid.* P. 122.

Notes

1. *Brown D.* Tchaikovsky: The man and his music. London, 2006. P 175.
2. *Strutte W.* Tchaikovsky: his life and times. Kent, 1979. P 80.
3. *Brown D.* Tchaikovsky: The Crisis Years (1874–1878). Vol. 2. New York : London, 1983. P. 233.
4. *Volkoff V.* Tchaikovsky: a self-portrait. Boston : London, 1975. P. 160.

Seven-year old Tchaikovsky wrote this poem in French: “Country! Now you are far from me, I do not see you any more, dear fatherland! I kiss you. O! adored land you, oh beloved Russia come! Come near me you, place where I was born I greet you! oh, dear country a long time ago, when I was born I had neither memory nor reason nor gift of speech oh, I did not know that my Fatherland was Russia.”