

PYOTR

The life and music of Pyotr Illyich Tchaikovsky



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PROLOGUE

A STUDY IN THE ART OF CONTRADICTION.

Pyotr Tchaikovsky was deeply affected by the women in his life – those he loved, those he despised, and those whose affection he longed so badly to hold.

Yet his truest love was reserved only for men.

Pyotr had an intense patriotism for his homeland. But only by leaving Russia was a deep relationship with the country of his birth finally realized.

He wrote some of the most delicate, sensual and romantic music ever composed, and yet his 1812 overture is among the loudest pieces classical piece of music ever performed. And perhaps the only one that includes a cannon as a percussion instrument.

In death, Tchaikovsky was celebrated as one of the most gifted voices of classical music, though the details of his personal life were whitewashed for years. To this day, his homosexuality is still denied amongst official circles in Russia, even though he is almost a national hero in the nation of his birth.

Perhaps it is only by celebrating the music he created, the reflection of human emotion – from profound sorrow to magical wonder that we can truly understand the timeless conflicts that are Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky.

“In daily intercourse we all loved him, because we felt he loved us in return. His sensibility was extreme, therefore I had to be very careful how I treated him. A trifle wounded him deeply. He was brittle as porcelain.”

Fanny Dürbach

(Tchaikovsky's childhood governess)

CHAPTER I
VOTKINSK, RUSSIA - 1847



Pyotr rubbed his hands together as hard as he could, hoping that maybe, just maybe, it would calm him a little. He did not want to tremble like a silly girl when it was his turn to perform. The cuts on his hands had almost healed, but one deep scar remained. He clenched his fists wishing the wound could somehow magically vanish.

It was before he had a keyboard or a piano teacher or any way to make music, that he had cut his hand so deeply. He was searching for sounds, musical notes like the ones he heard on the orchestrion organ that papa played sometimes. Pyotr had tapped on the windowpane in the kitchen, listening to the dull sound of his finger tapping the glass.

He tapped a little harder and reached higher. Then he pounded even harder. It was not the sound he wanted. He reached lower and pounded fiercely, over and over, until suddenly the window shattered. He screamed in pain, blood pouring from the gash in his hand, dripping onto the polished kitchen floor.

“Mama!” he cried. “Mama! Please, help me!”

But she was not home and it was papa who bandaged his hands that night and said ‘yes, yes,’ they would find a music tutor

and ‘yes’, she would show him all the notes and ‘of course’ he could practice every day.

Now here he was on his seventh birthday, getting set to perform after practicing for so long. He had dreamed about this party for almost a week. It was papa’s idea, to celebrate Pyotr’s birthday. All the children would play for the special guests who had been invited; Fanny, his beautiful and perfect governess, Maria his wonderful music tutor and Jakub, papa’s handsome army friend from far away Poland.

Pyotr watched his sister, Sasha, at the piano as she began to play the music she had struggled with all week – *Zerlina’s Aria* by Wolfgang Mozart. The music teased his ears, and exploded in his head with its raw beauty. Sasha played it much too quickly, and she hit at least two wrong notes. No matter, even she could not damage music as perfect as this.

When Sasha was done, she stood up and bowed. The guests clapped and cheered. Pyotr was delighted, but mama did not seem happy. What had displeased her?

“And now,” his tutor Maria announced, rising from her chair, “Aleksandra, our precious ‘Sasha’, and Master Pyotr Ilyich have a surprise for their Mama, Madam Tchaikovsky!” She motioned for Pyotr. He stepped beside Sasha and felt his face turn red. It was on fire. He was much too frightened to play, even though he tried to be brave for such honoured guests.

He caught Fanny’s eye. She smiled and blew him a kiss. Oh, that he could kiss her right now, on those lips he dreamed about so often, lying awake in his bed at night. She waved her hand for him to take his place and she blew him another kiss. He glowed in the warmth of her face, and her smile and—

“Pyotr!” his mother’s stern whisper cut his daydream short. She looked at him coldly and tilted her head towards the piano. He shivered, turned around and took his place on the bench beside his sister. They placed their hands on the keys, waiting for instructions to begin.

“Please open your ears and your hearts, for the world

premiere of 'Our Mama in Petersburg' by Pyotr and Aleksandra Tchaikovsky," Maria announced in a very big voice for such a tiny parlour.

Together, Pyotr and Sasha began to play. He felt embarrassed by the simplicity of the song, the first he one he had ever tried to make. It must surely be the most horrible music ever written. As they played, he decided he would run and hide as soon as they were finished. Sasha smiled and bounced up and down, nearly knocking him off the bench. This was just a silly game to her.

Mercifully, it was soon over. Everyone clapped again and cheered loudly. Papa even whistled. Pyotr turned around and saw that Mama had no expression whatsoever on her face. He tried to catch her eye, but she turned to papa and said something to him. She rose stiffly and left the room.

Pyotr wanted to shrivel up. If he could simply melt, like ice under the hot Russian sun and quietly flow down the sewer by their house, he would happily do so. He felt his eyes growing wet. He tried to dry them, mad at himself for thinking he could write music like Mozart.

"Pyotr, that was very lovely," a deep voice proclaimed.

It was Jakub, father's friend from far away Poland. Fanny stood next to him and both of them beamed. Mama was gone and Papa had hurried away after her.

"Thank you, sir," Pyotr replied stiffly. "But, you must think my music quite silly. I know it is very awful."

"Nonsense!" Jakub replied. He sat down next to Pyotr on the piano bench. "I thought it most delightful." His fingers touched the keyboard, and he played the first bar of 'Our Mama in Petersburg' and then added a flourish and a dramatic ending. "There you go. I just played my first Tchaikovsky!"

Pyotr stared with amazement, his heart pounding in his ears.

"Now, let me show you something else you might enjoy," Jakub continued. "This is a new mazurka by Frédéric Chopin. He is Polish, like me."

Fanny leaned over and whispered, "Happy Birthday, Pyotr!"

She hugged him warmly. As she walked away, Jakub began to play such a lively and joyous music as had ever been made on the old family piano. Pyotr sat still listening, seeing the notes as pictures in his head while Jakub performed on the bench beside him.

"You like?" Jakub grinned as he finished.

"Very much, sir," Pyotr replied. "May I try?"

"Please do!"

Pyotr placed his hands on the keys and closed his eyes. He paused a few seconds and then began to play the mazurka, hoping to find the joy that Chopin must have felt composing this. Pyotr could hear the music inside of him, and let it pour out through his fingers, tentative at first and then gaining confidence, until he finished smartly and bowed his head.

"Pyotr!" Jakub exclaimed. "That was... simply extraordinary!" He leaned over and kissed Pyotr on both cheeks and then excitedly, right on the lips. "You have done master Chopin very, very proud!"

Pyotr stared in wonder and let tears stream freely down his face. This was the best birthday party he could ever remember.

SAINT PETERSBURG - 1850

The last bag was finally lifted, with great grunting effort by the coachmen, to the very top of the carriage. His mother shouted to the driver that they needed to leave with all due haste before the rain became too heavy for the horses.

Pyotr watched as Mama lifted little Sasha up and into the carriage. Sasha waved madly once she found her seat and he smiled back as his darling sister. He didn't want to show her the growing dread inside him. In a few moments Mama and Sasha, and his grown-up stepsister Zina, would leave him in Petersburg.

Alone.

Alone, with no family, save for Modest Alekseyevich, who

would be his guardian while he attended school here in Petersburg, so very, very far away from home in Votinisk.

"Pyotr," his Mama said firmly, as she pulled her leather gloves down and straightened her coat, "you will be a good student. You will study hard and you will do as your guardian requests of you. And you will do it all with a humble attitude."

"Yes, Mama," Pyotr replied, "of course I will, but..." His ten-year-old eyes were wet, even as he fought to blink the tears away. "Do you... do you have to leave me here, alone?"

His mother leaned down and held his chin. She wiped his eyes and kissed him quickly. "You are almost a man now, Pyotr. It is time for you to act like a man."

She stood up and bowed her head to Modest Alekseyevich. "Thank you again for looking after Pyotr. He is a good boy, but sometimes..." she hesitated a moment, studying Pyotr with a frown, "sometimes he is much too delicate in his manner. I hope you can help him to grow up, not behave like such a child."

Modest nodded. "Do not worry about him. He will be like another son for me."

Without another word, Mama touched Pyotr's head, held it a second and walked away. She climbed into the carriage with Sasha and Zina, then called out to the coachmen. He acknowledged her with a loud crack of the whip and the two horses, glistening in the light rain, began to slowly pull the carriage away.

Pyotr watched it begin to move as the hooves of the horse clattered lightly on the stones.

"No!" he cried. "No, no, no!"

Modest Alekseyevich reached for him, but Pyotr pulled away from his grip. As the carriage rolled slowly down the lane, he ran behind, desperate to find a way to stop it. They could not leave him alone, deserted like this from Mama and papa, and from all his brothers and sisters.

He would die of loneliness here. He must stop them. Must beg Mama not to go, not to leave him.

“Mama!” he yelled as ran after the carriage. The startled coachmen turned toward him and their eyes met.

Mama peered out from the carriage. “*Nyet!*” She tried to wave him off, but Pyotr kept running until finally he caught up and grabbed first at the footboard, then the splashboard, and was dragged along until he lost his grip and fell onto the muddy lane.

He lay dazed in the mud a moment, staring at the carriage which had stopped. His mother peered out at him. He picked himself up and ran toward her, but the carriage had already started to roll down the lane again. Pyotr ran after it and lashed himself against one the large wheels of the moving vehicle which suddenly stopped as the driver pulled back hard on the reins.

He held the wheel and cried out in despair, “Mama! Don’t leave me!”

Her head poked out of the carriage. She looked at him sternly. “You are not a boy anymore, Pyotr.”

With that she motioned with her arm for the coachmen to proceed. He nodded and cracked his whip once more. As the carriage began to move, Pyotr felt himself being lifted off the wheels by strong arms. Modest held him tightly as the coach rolled away.

Pyotr felt his chest tighten. He fought for breath and began to shiver as he watched the coach disappear down the muddy, cobblestone lane into the misty morning rain.

“IT’S A *FRICTION MATCH*,” ANATOLI EXPLAINED AS PYOTR watched in wonder. His new friend at the Schmelling school struck a small stick against a piece of coarse paper and *voila*, a tiny flame erupted. Anatoli, used it to light the thin cigarette he produced clandestinely from the pocket of his blazer.

After a few puffs, he passed the lit cigarette to Pyotr who eagerly accepted it and placed it to his lips.

“Just inhale,” Anatoli explained. “You might cough a little, but let it work its way inside you. It will refresh you.”

Pyotr sucked the little rolled paper filled with sweet tobacco. At first it bit his throat and he almost gagged, but he was determined to ingest the smoke like Anatoli, the only friend he had in this school and the only one who seemed to believe whatever Pyotr told him.

After a few drags, he passed the burning cigarette back. “Last night I heard the sound again, music sounds following me into my sleep and when I awoke, they came and followed me to school this morning.”

Anatoli stared back as he took a deep suck on the cigarette. The tip of it glowed brightly, as if in satisfaction to Pyotr’s story. “Do you ever write them down?” Anatoli asked. “These musical sounds? You know I would love to know what they sound like...”

“*Prekati eto!*” The sharp voice of the school inspector, Colonel Rutenberg startled the boys.

“Stop what?” Anatoli shot back, flinging the lit cigarette under the bench and stepping on it.

Colonel Rutenberg bent over, yanked Anatoli’s foot away and picked up the crushed, smoldering remains of the cigarette. “Trying to fool me?” the Colonel intoned darkly. He crushed the cigarette and threw it into the boy’s face. “Come with me. Now!”

Anatoli stood up, head held high, and walked towards the school’s back entrance, as Pyotr watched in alarm and then followed, keeping his eyes lowered to the ground.

Inside the classroom, the Colonel ordered Anatoli to the front of the classroom. “Your fiendish classmate was caught smoking *and* lying,” the Colonel boomed to the twenty-three young boys, the oldest of whom had only last week celebrated his eleventh birthday.

“For that, he is sentenced to sixty-five strokes, by my own hand.” Colonel Rutenberg paused a moment as a collective gasp rose from the boys. “Then each of you will feel the whip, should

you wonder how it might feel upon your own backside, if you too choose to disobey the rules.”

Anatoli, silent and brave to this point, cowered on his knees now. “Please, sir. I stupidly erred in judgement! Please, have mercy!” His eyes were wet.

“Strip!” the Colonel shouted. “You made your choices. Now remove all your clothing, and lay yourself across this bench.” He dragged it closer to where Anatoli remained kneeling. “Now!”

Shaking, shivering and sobbing, Anatoli removed his trousers and his shirt. He stood, looking sheepish in his boxers and black socks.

“I said *all* your clothing,” the Colonel grunted. “Unless you want another twenty lashes.”

Anatoli flinched. “No, sir. No!” He removed his socks and then turned around and removed his boxers. Pyotr stared from his seat, his heart was pounding like a canon firing over and over in his chest. He was not sure he could watch much more without blacking out.

Anatoli lay himself prostrate over the bench. His naked bottom was exposed, waiting for his punishment. Colonel Rutenberg gathered the leather switch in hands. “Let each kiss of the whip remind you of your duty to Schmelling, to Russia, to your classmates and... to me!”

With that, he snapped the leather rod across Anatoli’s exposed buttocks. The boy yelped sharply and Pyotr thought he could feel the leather rod himself. Another lash, and another and another... until both Anatoli and Pyotr were sobbing through muffled screams.

With each loud crack of the switch against bare flesh, Pyotr felt wounded, ashamed and afraid. When it was over, Anatoli laying writing on the ground, naked and curled in a ball. The other boys lined up and one-by-one, exposed their bare bottom and received five sharp, burning lashes.

As Pyotr felt the pain bite into him for his first lash, he thought he might die. When the last one struck his body, he

cried out in one final sob and let the sound of sorrow echo deep within him to the darkest corners of his heart.

VOTKINSK - 1854

His sister Sasha carefully covered the smoky mirror in the parlour with a long black cloth, casting Pyotr's reflection into darkness. He knew the mirror was a gateway to the land of the dead. He was not afraid that if he was the first person to see his image after Mama died he would be next – at only fourteen.

This was not her night to die.

"Pyotr," his father whispered. "The clocks, will you please..." His words trailed off.

"No, Papa," Pyotr said softly. "She is stronger than the cholera."

His father's face sagged. He released a deep, hollow moan – a sound more sorrowful than the saddest chord Pyotr had ever heard played on any instrument.

"But if her time *is* tonight," his father rasped, "you must stop the clocks."

"Why, Papa?"

"To help her soul pass..."

Before his father could finish, a tall figure in a black cassock approached. His long hair and beard were untrimmed and untamed. The gold cross around his neck glinted, and the wide *kamilavka* on his head cast a towering shadow on the wall filling Pyotr with a sense of foreboding.

"You must come with me now," the hieromonk priest said in a dark, glottal tone like gravel grinding in tar.

The hieromonk bowed his head and without another word, turned and marched slowly toward the bedroom chamber where Pyotr knew his mother rested. He followed the priest and his father into the dimly lit chamber. A single candle flickered low on the nightstand.

“Pyotr?” a weak voice called out.

His mother lay tiny and frail in the middle of the bed. At but fourteen years old, Pyotr knew more of this horrible disease than he cared to ever know. The cholera left its victims withered up and shriveled – and dead.

“Mama,” he cried, from his place beside the bed. “I am here. You must be strong.”

He raised a hand toward her face, but his father stopped him, slowly lowering his hand. “No,” he whispered, “you mustn't touch her.”

The hieromonk leaned over the bed. His beard was so long it touched the sheets drawn over Pyotr's mother. “I will hear your confession now.”

There was no response to the request. Pyotr waited anxiously, hoping his mother would rise up from her bed and cast away forever any doubt that she would leave this world. He glanced back at his sister Sasha and his brothers Anatoly and Modest who stood in the shadows weeping quietly, their heads bowed in resignation.

“Confess your sins,” the priest repeated, “so you can receive the *Viaticum*, your last Holy Communion.”

There was only silence to the hieromonk's demand, save the quiet sobbing of the children that filled the dark, tiny chamber with an eerie harmony. Pyotr could not help join them as his chest tightened and the beating of his heart joined the chorus of hurt.

“I” a hollow voice from the bed whispered, “have...”

Everyone in the room listened in reverent silence for Mama to complete her confession. Finally with a tiny gasp she added, “...sinned.”

The effort to expel three simple words took almost a minute.

The priest responded. “Your sins are forgiven, Alexandra Andreievna” he said, making the sign of the cross.

Everyone followed his lead as he continued. “The Lamb of

God, who takes away the sins of the world, is with you tonight. Happy are those who are called to his supper.”

He took a small piece of crust and held it up. “*Corpus autem Christi*,” he sang in a chant that seared Pyotr’s ears. “The Body of Christ,” the priest repeated, moving his hand closer to Alexandra’s lips, and touching them with the tiny morsel of bread.

Her mouth opened ever so slightly to his touch. The heiromonk pushed the eucharist into her mouth.

Pyotr could barely see her face through his wet eyes. “Mama!” he cried, leaning close to her face. Her eyes opened a second, looking right through him as she passed from this world forever.

THE DARK INK FROM HIS STEEL PEN GATHERED AT THE NIB IN A menacing blob.

Pyotr stared as it grew larger and larger until it finally fell onto a blank sheet of parchment paper, splattering like black blood on ice. He closed his eyes, seeing his mother’s face staring at him, even four months after that wretched night in June.

His head sagged. He shivered under the late October chill seeping into his dormitory room. The trees outside were nearly naked now, shedding their leaves even more profusely than the tears he still spilled for her nearly every day.

“Pyotr,” he scolded himself, “you need to write, to Fanny Dürbach, tell her that Mama is gone.”

He placed the tip of his pen on the parchment, stained with the abstract pattern from the messy drop of black ink. The abstraction took shape into the face of *Cataba*, the Satan himself. In horror, Pyotr crumpled the parchment paper and tossed it onto the floor, landing beside the two other letters he had started to write to his old governess in Paris.

Parchment paper was expensive, and he was ashamed of what he had done. A boy of fourteen should be responsible and

mature, not frightened by imaginary ghosts of ink. He would have to...

There was a knock on the door.

"Pyotr?" a familiar voice sang out.

It belonged to Vladimir Stepanovich, the dearest, kindest soul Pyotr had ever met. And, the only boy here at the School of Jurisprudence who understood that Mozart was not dead. The great composer lived in the opera house, inside the miraculous voices of the tenors and the sopranos who performed the *Don Giovanni* opera on Friday and Saturday nights.

"*Il mio tesoro intanto*," Vladimir sang loudly in his best Italian as he sprang open the door, hiding his face behind a black cape.

Pyotr's heart quickened. The music of the aria flooded over him, and he responded to Vladimir's impromptu performance, repeating the opening phrase in Russian. "To my beloved, oh hasten," Pyotr sang and then added, "to comfort, to comfort and console my sad heart."

Vladimir dropped his cape as Pyotr continued singing and rushed forward. The two boys hugged and held each a moment, then stepped apart – flushed and breathless.

"Are you ready, my dearest?" Vladimir asked.

The grin on his face was infectious and Pyotr kicked away the crumpled letters littering the floor, as if to vanquish them for trying to spoil this moment. He had nearly forgotten tonight was the night he and Vladimir would experience *Don Giovanni* again, for the third time in the last month.

"You know I am, dear.... dear, my Vladimir," Pyotr laughed, still singing the aria with his own words and repeating and extending each syllable, "dear, dear, my Vlad-i-mir!"

The both laughed and quickly made their way to the opera house. It was overflowing with patrons that night, but being so nimble and so early, they found unclaimed seats near the front, although off to the far side of the theatre.

As the performance began with a thundering blast in D minor, the boys sat staring at the empty stage. The brutal force

of the opening chords lingered over them a few moments, followed by a dramatic, almost deathly silence until the dark opening chord was deliciously repeated.

Pyotr's spine tingled.

He could feel the presence of Mozart in the opera house, announcing his immortality to anyone who could listen with their whole heart. As the overture sweetened to an impetuous confirmation of life and love, Pyotr thought again about his dear mother in Heaven now, surely.

Vladimir sitting beside him turned and smiled. His face was not that of a boy, but of an angel radiating love in its most pure form. The two boys stared at each other, grinning and nodding. No words were needed. *Herr* Mozart's music took care of all they wished to say to each other.

When finally, the performers took to the stage and the first aria began, Vladimir reached his slender hand across the seat and took hold of Pyotr's. The touch was warm and Pyotr responded by squeezing Vladimir's hand in return, lost in the magic of excited feelings coming from both the stage and the person beside him.

IT WAS ONLY A FEW WEEKS LATER THAT THE FIRST TRUE BITE OF winter arrived. This morning it bit into Pyotr's face. The wind and blowing snow nearly blinded him as he hurried toward school with Sergei and Vladimir.

The friends were as close as any three boys could be, so much so that Pyotr was often lost in his emotions towards them. And embarrassed by the impurity of his feelings.

"Hurry, you little frozen goats," Sergie laughed as he pushed Pyotr from behind. "I need time to lick you dry!"

Vladimir, the main trickster and constant singer in the group as well as the one never short for a quick retort, pushed Pyotr from the other side. "Lick you dry and eat your pie!"

Despite the vulgar words, Pyotr smiled and shook his head. Why did these songs – these crude little ditty's cause him such excitement? They awakened feelings no boy should feel, but still...

"Pyotr, Pyotr, Pyotr," Vladimir sang, "my dearest, dearest Pyotr, don't make it so *hard* for me... or I'll make it *hard* for you!"

Sergei screamed in delight and just as they reached the door of the school, almost an hour before the first class would begin, he jumped on Pyotr, pushing him into the snowbank and washing his face with snow.

But rather than be upset, Pyotr laid back in the snowbank and let Sergei wipe his face clean until the snow melted on his lips under the gentle, but persistent attention of his friend's long fingers.

"Stop it, you two *devushki*!" Vladimir sang. "Come on! The door's open!"

THE PIANOFORTE AT THE FRONT OF THE CLASSROOM WAS USED just about every day as part of instruction at the School of Jurisprudence. Whether it was to inspire, entertain or just provide a little relief when the professor himself was losing interest in the lesson, Pyotr did not know.

And he did not care.

He could use this instrument to say things that words alone could never express.

"Can we dance to your waltz?" Sergei asked as he and Vladimir stood waiting for Pyotr to begin.

"Of course," Pyotr replied. "But please, don't be silly. This is for her."

The two boys standing in front of him dropped their heads. "We know," Vladimir said with a tone of respect. "You wrote it for Mama, your Mama. God bless her soul in Heaven."

“Thank you,” Pyotr replied. “I only pray she might hear it and understand how much she is still in my heart.”

He opened his music sheets and trembled a little as he placed his hands on the keys of the pianoforte. This would be so feeble he thought, compared to Mozart who he knew had already composed whole operas and symphonies by this age.

Nonetheless, Pyotr had decided without telling even his most loved companions, the two boys standing right in front of him, he had decided he would devote his life to music, even though his tutor had told him there was no future as a ‘musical’ in Russia.

“Let us hear it!” Sergei pleaded. “We want to dance before another day of boredom starts.”

Pyotr nodded and began to play. Slowly, he let the sound rise from the pianoforte, the hammers inside striking the strings with decided purpose. The classroom was filled with the music of the waltz and though it might not be as fine as the overture from *Don Giovanni*, it carried Sergei and Vladimir around the room a dozen times over.

As he watched them dancing to his music, a creation offered up to his mother in Paradise, Pyotr knew that whatever happened to his dreams, nothing would ever spoil the memory of this moment.

THANKS FOR READING

We hope you enjoyed this sample of Pyotr - The life and music of Pyotr Illyich Tchaikovsky.

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