

The daily task of being human: André Tchaikowsky, the man and his music

Pianist and lecturer in Classical Music, Nico de Villiers, recalls his first experiences of the composer André Tchaikowsky, and looks at the life and work of an extraordinary man and musician – ahead of a symposium at Leeds College of Music on 1 November 2013.

“I suppose you know the story of his skull...?”, asks mezzo-soprano Clare McCaldin nonchalantly. I wish I could have said “I knew him, Horatio”, but as we Skyped about our collaboration on *Seven Shakespeare Sonnets* by André Tchaikowsky that evening, I only knew him as a pianist, and that he had also composed a handful of works.

Clare and I are due to perform the songs at a symposium devoted to the life and work of Tchaikowsky at the beginning of November at Leeds College of Music. Having arranged rehearsal dates we sign off, and I start my search to find out more about Tchaikowsky's skull.

Other than the Shakespeare *Sonnets*, the Bard features heavily throughout Tchaikowsky's oeuvre: there is incidental music to *Hamlet*, a chamber work *Ariel* (with text from *The Tempest*) for mezzo and mixed ensemble and an opera, *The Merchant of Venice*. In addition to these recordings and compositions, André's story continues beyond the grave into the world of Shakespeare.

Tchaikowsky harboured a life-long dream to be an actor, and posthumously joined one of the world's most famous theatre companies when he bequeathed his skull to the Royal Shakespeare Company. It was to be used – so he hoped – in stagings of *Hamlet*.

However, due to red tape regarding human remains, only a copy of Tchaikowsky's skull had been used. His real debut came 17 years after his death in the hands of actor David Tennant, who agreed to holding the actual skull on stage in an RSC run of *Hamlet* in Stratford-upon-Avon and London's West End in 2009. The Royal Mail subsequently included a picture of Tennant holding Tchaikowsky's skull aloft in a series of stamps celebrating the golden jubilee of the Royal Shakespeare Company in 2011.

The Man Behind the Skull

In the centenary year of Benjamin Britten's birth it is easy for any other musical celebrations or discoveries to be eclipsed by the global attention that Britten's legacy has (rightly so) drawn. However, while Britten's final opera *Death in Venice* receives several performances in 2013 world-wide (including its Russian premier), the Bregenz Festival included another premier, also set in Venice, in their 2013/2014 season. André Tchaikowsky's only opera, *The Merchant of Venice*, has been a massive discovery in the operatic world thanks to director David Pountney. Tchaikowsky worked on his opera from 1968 and completed it shortly before his untimely death in June 1982.

The young Robert Andrzej Krauthammer started piano lessons with his mother, but was forced with other Polish Jews into the Warsaw ghetto during the Second World War. In 1942 he escaped from the ghetto with his grandmother and false papers, with which he became Andrzej Czajkowski. After living in

Łódź he moved to France, where he studied at the Paris Conservatoire. On graduating, he returned to Poland and it was during the mid-1950s that his reputation as a concert pianist was established after winning prizes at the Chopin Competition in Warsaw and the Queen Elizabeth of Belgium Competition.

Acclaimed pianist Arthur Rubinstein referred to Tchaikowsky as ‘...one of the finest pianists of our generation...’, including also that ‘he is a wonderful musician.’ Rubinstein’s assistance and the guidance of the impresario Sol Hurok launched Tchaikowsky’s international performing career. He studied in Brussels with Polish pianist Stefan Askenase and composition with Nadia Boulanger.

By 1960 Tchaikowsky established a rhythm between performance and composition, which he balanced with his great interest in the works of Shakespeare, playing bridge and corresponding. He maintained this lifestyle until his life was claimed by colon cancer.

Music of the Skull

Even though his music shows influences of composers like Bartók, Stravinsky, Shostakovich and Alban Berg, the individuality of Tchaikowsky’s work lies in its duality, which constantly seems to juxtapose opposites. From his earliest works he claims certain colours and gestures, which he reiterates throughout his small, yet excellent oeuvre, developing each idea through every compositional mutation. His love for linear structures interweaves and contrasts through contrapuntal and fugal writing, and the harmonic density is passionately counteracted with argumentative expressions. His scores often include the indication *pizzicato* in the piano, an instruction usually reserved for string instruments. His melodic writing is often wound around certain harmonies, which make any leaps very surprising. Aggressive spiky chords are often contrasted with sections indicated as *mesto* (sad). The colour palette ranges from nebulous and stratospheric floating sounds to earthy feet-pounding and frustrated dissonant sound clusters.

A constant struggle – be it extrovert in exclamation, or brooding and introvert – is constantly present in his works. Life as expressed through his compositions is indeed a task. He worded this notion in his diary entry of 12 January 1980, referring to “...the daily task of being human...”.

Over the past few weeks I got to know the cartography of that skull Clare mentioned as I am now preparing not only the Shakespeare settings, but also the *Trio Notturmo* which is to be included in the same programme as the Shakespeare songs. My work on these two substantial compositions was interrupted when I had to speedily prepare the piano sonata from 1958 for its first recording to be included on a disc by Toccata Classics.

Due to the limited time frame there was no time for the luxury of niceties of getting to know the composer, I had to delve into the work – as did my piano colleague from Leeds College of Music who recorded the Inventions for the same compilation recording. Jakob Fichert and I shall be sharing a disc with Polish pianist Maciej Grzybowski, who is playing Tchaikowsky’s piano concerto with the Vienna Symphony Orchestra and Paul Daniel conducting.

A Symposium – The legacy

As a concert pianist, the recordings Tchaikowsky made for the RCA Victor label adds up to ten in total. As he was reluctant to perform his own compositions, commercial recordings of his own interpretations do not exist, and there is a limited number of other commercial recordings of his

compositions on the market. This therefore makes the attention currently paid to his life and work even more justified.

A leading figure in the writing of the story of André Tchaikowsky is Dr Anastasia Belina-Johnson, Classical Pathway Leader at Leeds College of Music. Belina-Johnson draws on Tchaikowsky's diaries and correspondence, as well as her own research conducted in Warsaw, in order to paint a clear portrait of not only the composer and concert pianist, but also the troubled existence and personal insecurities of the man behind the music.

The launch of the German translation of Belina-Johnson's book, *Die tägliche Mühe ein Mensch zu sein* coincided with the Bregenz Festival premiere of *The Merchant of Venice*.

On 1 November Leeds College of Music is presenting a symposium in which the legacy of André Tchaikowsky is established further. As a part of celebrating Tchaikowsky's birthday, the original English version of Belina-Johnson's book, *A Musician Divided: André Tchaikowsky in his own Words* as well as a disc of some of Tchaikowsky's piano music (published respectively by Toccata Press and Toccata Classics) will be launched on the day.

Mark Charles' documentary *André Tchaikowsky and The Merchant of Venice* will be shown for the first time and director David Pountney will join a panel to discuss Tchaikowsky, his opera, and its Bregenz Festival premiere.

The whole André Tchaikowsky project will culminate in a recital at the end of the symposium. Renowned pianist Colin Stone will perform Inventions for solo piano. This set of works comprises of 10 miniatures (11 if you include the alternative version of the fifth Invention), and are all sketches of Tchaikowsky's friends and colleagues.

Distinguished clarinettist Janet Hilton will perform the *Arioso and Fuga for solo clarinet* as well as the Clarinet Sonata, joined by Leeds College of Music lecturer and German pianist, Jakob Fichert. Before I perform the piano sonata of 1958, mezzo-soprano Clare McCaldin, who is renowned for her innovative recital programmes and interpretation of contemporary music will perform the *Seven Shakespeare Sonnets*. The recital is to be concluded by a performance of Tchaikowsky's piano trio, *Trio Notturmo*, to be performed by three Leeds College of Music lecturers: violinist Sebastian Müller, cellist Alfia Nakipbekova and myself.

Leeds College of Music is a leading conservatoire in the UK, which is promoting cross-disciplinary performance and study.

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