

The Other Tchaikowsky



Courtesy of Sophie Baker

André Tchaikowsky (1935 - 1982) (c. 1975)

This promotional photograph was taken in early October 1975 to show André with his new beard. The location was the London home of conductor Uri Segal, where André was working on corrections for his piano concerto score. This was André's last promotional photograph.

Chapter 1 - The Legacy (1935-1982)

As André Tchaikowsky had wished, his memorial service was small, non-religious, and musical. It was Friday, July 2, 1982, 11 a.m., at the Oxford Crematorium where sixty people joined to fill nearly every seat in the "Chapel of Remembrance." Except for his skull, André was now dust within a picturesque urn on the nonsectarian altar. Those who attended his memorial service carried with them one thing in common; each had pieces of a fascinating puzzle which they collectively or individually had tried but failed to fit together. All knew an André to whom they had been attached in some very compelling way but none could explain him, or where he belonged in the world of human activity or in the world of music as a pianist and composer.

Like many of André's concerts, his memorial service had mixed reviews. Some were offended by the over-dressed, over-scented ladies who brought to the sedate Oxford chapel an eastern European atmosphere that bespoke André's family origins in the Jewish cultures of Poland and Germany. Some had a shocked reaction to the comments by minister Chad Varah, or perhaps thought it tasteless, when he said:

"During one of his well-periods, André and I went for a walk in Oxford. I would comment on all the pretty girls, and André on all the pretty boys."

The primary musical selection at the service was received with both expectation and sadness: it was the first performance of André Tchaikowsky's composition, "Trio Nottumo." The composition was written for, and performed by, Peter Frankl, piano, György Pauk, violin, and Ralph Kirshbaum, 'cello. No disparagement here; it was a touching and wonderful performance. The official world premiere was two days later (July 4) at the Cheltenham Festival. Of this performance, William Mann, music critic for *The Times*, wrote:

The two abruptly contrasted movements challenge instrumental virtuosity at every turn; they might have sounded simply hard going, but were revealed, with formidable cogency, as invigorating to play and listen to, especially in the rapid middle section of the second movement, an alarmingly brilliant feat of imagination.

Years earlier, pianist Arthur Rubinstein gave André Tchaikowsky a "quote" to use in his programs and promotional material:

I think André Tchaikowsky is one of the finest pianists of our generation -- he is even better than that -- he is a wonderful musician.

It was common for Polish musicians to get a "quote" from Rubinstein, but there was a difference in André's case because Rubinstein went far beyond a gratuitous remark. Rubinstein opened doors for André Tchaikowsky: huge tours of America under the auspices of the great impresario Sol Hurok, a recording contract with RCA records, personal recommendations to conductor friends, in particular, Fritz Reiner of the Chicago Symphony. Rubinstein selected André Tchaikowsky as a fitting successor to the Rubinstein position in the music world.

Rubinstein also saw the appeal of the story of a young and prodigiously talented Jew who had survived in the midst of the worst horrors of the Nazi occupation of Poland, and who had developed his talent in spite of his impossible situation. It didn't hurt either to have the name Tchaikowsky, although André was unrelated to the great Russian composer. Yet, doors opened by Rubinstein were shut by Tchaikowsky, or more accurately, slammed shut.

As a composer, André Tchaikowsky was virtually unknown to the concert-going public. His Trio Nottumo, for example, was just Opus 6. A continuous performance of his published compositions Opus 1 to Opus 6 would total just 2 hours, although his opera, Opus 7, would add another 2-1/2 hours. This isn't much to show for a lifetime of composing. His published compositions are:

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- Opus 1 - Sonata for Clarinet and Piano (1959)
- Opus 2 - The "Inventions" for Piano (1961-1962)
- Opus 3 - String Quartet No.1 (1969-1970)
- Opus 4 - Piano Concerto (1966-1971)
- Opus 5 - String Quartet No.2 (1973-75)
- Opus 6 - Trio Nottumo (1978)
- Opus 7 - Opera "The Merchant of Venice" (1968-1982)

There are many other excellent compositions, but they were neglected by André himself. Among these are song cycles, a violin concerto, a solo work for clarinet, a Sonata for Piano, and an earlier Piano Concerto (1956-1957).

The performance of André's Trio Nottumo pointed to an ultimate irony of André's career: he performed at the piano only to win time to compose, but his unique music is of such difficulty to learn, often requiring unusual instrumentation, as to almost assure that it would not be performed publicly. Subject to this perversity, most of his music has come to rest in places where it gathers dust and with each year has less chance of being heard. Adding to the difficulty of the music was the difficulty of a composer who rarely performed his own music and did nothing to promote performances of his compositions by others.

As a pianist, André was always a musician's musician. He was never a forceful, demonstrative showman like Vladimir Horowitz, nor did he convey the effusive bonhomie that made Arthur Rubinstein such a popular favorite. André was an inward pianist who brought a composer's view to each piece; every detail was crucial. It was the piano cognoscenti who really understood and respected his playing. In the crowded Warsaw Ghetto, his very early piano training was restricted to playing a closed keyboard cover, allowing him only to hear the notes in his mind. As a teenager, he was a prize winning product of the Paris and Warsaw Conservatories, and a top level performer in the international Chopin and Queen Elizabeth Competitions. André at twenty years old evoked the highest praise from music critics around the world. He had few doubts about his talent, and neither did the arbiters of the concert performance world.

The dark side of this seemingly glorious start of a career included migraine headaches, loneliness, insomnia, drugs, and sudden panicky rushes on stage to plunge into the music in fear that any other approach might result in disaster. Then there were insults to the society matrons on whom the music world relies so much for its existence. All this made for a growing collection of outrageously humorous tales of André's performances on stage and off stage. He was serious about music, but his personality drove him into wildly bizarre situations, from which he found wildly bizarre ruses for escape.

As a person, André Tchaikowsky assumed a variety of guises. Some knew him only as an incredibly funny, charming man with a remarkable personality and phenomenal memory. To others, he was harsh and opinionated. If you were truly a close friend, you eventually received something called the "treatment," a savage verbal attack designed to dispose of you permanently. The friend's offense was often trivial, but André had delicately balanced sensibilities and something very slight could trigger an outburst.

André Tchaikowsky had a passionate life of the mind -- he was a voracious reader in four languages (Polish, French, English, German), and a world-class expert on the works of William Shakespeare and French literature. He had a penchant for practical jokes and a biting wit, which led to interesting encounters. The day after a concert in Germany, the local newspaper featured a photograph of André with the caption, "Man goes berserk and kills wife." Nearby was another photograph with the caption, "Superb music from a superb musician." Somehow André's photo became mixed up with that of a suspected killer. A representative from the newspaper came to André's hotel to offer profuse apologies, but André cut him off saying, "I couldn't have killed that man's wife -- last night I was killing Mozart."

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Composer Andrzej Panufnik relates this André Tchaikowsky ("famous pianist") story in his autobiography *Composing Myself*.

I remember telling [pianist] Fou Ts'ong the experience of a conductor friend of mine working with a famous pianist, who, rehearsing on the day of their concert, indulged in frequent and unpredictable changes of tempo. The poor conductor became quite frantic trying to keep the orchestra within the same bar as the soloist to prevent the whole performance from falling apart. After the rehearsal, seeing my unlucky friend tearing his hair and making quick marks in his score to remind himself of the details of this erratic interpretation, the soloist practically gave my friend a heart attack by saying, "Please don't worry. Tonight will be completely different!"

On one occasion, André felt he had played an excellent recital but the applause was rather meager. His reaction was a single encore -- the entire "Goldberg Variations," a work lasting nearly an hour. By the end, the recital hall had completely emptied. On another occasion, at a Mozart concerto concert, André improvised a twenty-minute cadenza using themes from Bartók's Miraculous Mandarin. The furious conductor finally brought in the orchestra after shouting at André: "That's enough!"

André's physical and mental health posed something of an enigma throughout most of his life. He was a hypochondriac with an enormous pill suitcase that went everywhere with him. There were pills to put him to sleep, pills to wake him up, pills for stage fright, pills for headaches, and so on. There was at least one suicide attempt and André spent many years in psychoanalysis. The effect of his illnesses, real and imagined, was a crippling of his prodigious abilities.

André worked with indefatigable passion for nearly half a century but left little evidence of what he had devoted his efforts to. The evidence that does exist is largely in the memories of those who knew him and those who heard him play. There are only a few recordings of his piano performances, now long out of production and difficult to locate; there are a number of compositions, but they are largely ignored and there has never been a commercial recording of a single work he composed. The life of André Tchaikowsky is a story of a certain type of musical integrity, of an artist with a viewpoint and the courage to take chances. His unconventional behavior was excused primarily by the often repeated: "I had a difficult childhood!" The sum total is great talent, even genius, plagued with insecurity, and uneven in performance. To those who knew him and heard him perform, something more was there, inextricably and inexplicably binding together personality and musicianship.

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MJD/EJG.

22nd July 1982.

Dear Mr. Harrison,

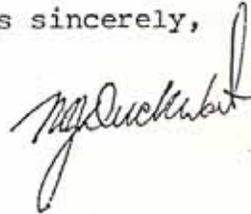
Thank you for your very nice letter of the 5th July, your comments being very much appreciated.

Thank you also for your very kind gesture which will be treated as a gift.

Andre's skull was delivered to the Royal Shakespeare Company at Stratford-on-Avon on Tuesday, 20th July.

It has been suggested that because the bequest to the Royal Shakespeare Company was so unusual that we write up the details and circumstances for our Professional Magazine and would appreciate your views as closest friend and literary executor, on this suggestion.

Yours sincerely,



M.J. Duckworth, Dip. F.D.,
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Courtesy of Terry Harrison

Skull confirmation letter from Reeves and Pain (1982)

André Tchaikowsky specified in his Will that his skull be donated to the Royal Shakespeare Company for use in theatrical productions. The skull was used as a prop for the 1984 RSC production of Hamlet, specifically, for a Hamlet poster posed with actor Roger Rees.

CHICAGO SUN-TIMES, Mon., Apr. 20, 1959 SECTION TWO 15

Tchaikowsky Proves His Box Office Appeal

By Robert C. Marsh

Pianist Andre Tchaikowsky made his fourth local appearance of the season Sunday afternoon in an Orchestra Hall recital. It proved that since his debut here in November 1957, this 23-year-old Polish war orphan has radiated enough box-office appeal that he is now able to fill a hall even in bad weather that normally kills "impulse attendance."

Young American pianists, few of whom could do as well, may speculate on the grounds for Tchaikowsky's success. That the patronage of Artur Schnabel and management of Sol Hurok have done marvels for him no one can question. There are few young artists who can fail to envy that sort of support for launching a career.

Does Tchaikowsky deserve this kind of backing? As a musician he is uneven in about the same ways that Schnabel himself was uneven for many years. And like Schnabel he can be exciting even when he is not being very profoundly musical. From this comes the managerial attitude. Tchaikowsky is a good draw now and

seems likely to become even better. If talent is what you sell, you sign artists that people demonstrate they want to hear.

For most of the listeners Sunday the high points in the program were Chopin's "Ballade No. 3" and the "Mephisto Waltz" of Liszt, brilliant pianistic showpieces that allowed the intensity and virtuosity of the artist to shine forth.

Unfortunately they also showed how that intensity has a way of getting out of control, as well as how young Tchaikowsky has to pound for a big tone and often spoils the texture of the music with excessive pedal.

The most promising thing I found during the afternoon was his fine statement of the final movement of the Beethoven Op. 109 sonata, in which the contrasting elements of the music were treated with individuality and sensitivity.

The world premiere of the eclectic "Sonata" (1958) of Uyu Dal came early in the afternoon, and the recital opened and closed with Bach pieces played in the manner of conservatory exercises.

Review of an André Tchaikowsky Piano Recital (1959)

Courtesy of David Poile

In this review, Robert C. Marsh identifies André Tchaikowsky's strengths and weaknesses as a piano recitalist. A few months later, André rejected his patrons Schnabel and Hurok and effectively ended his career. The "Sonata" (1958) by Uyu Dal (pronounced "Oooo You Doll") was André's own composition.