

The Other Czajkowski

Following King Roger by Karol Szymanowski and The Passenger by Mieczysław Weinberg, another Polish discovery comes to the Bregenz Festival with the premier of Andrzej Czajkowski's *The Merchant of Venice*. It proves to be an outstanding work, says Dorota Szwarzman in Polityka.



Czajkowski, the name that linked Andrzej with the famous Russian composer Pytor, was not his from birth. His real name was Robert Andrzej Krauthammer and he came from an assimilated Jewish family. Was Pytor Ilyich Tchaikovsky a favorite of Andrzej's grandmother, who arranged Aryan papers for her grandson during WWII? Or was the assumed name a coincidence? Today we do not know. One thing, however, is certain: Andrzej hated the music of Pytor and never wanted to play it.

Why then did Andrzej continue to work under his assumed name? Immediately after the war, it was thought preferable to keeping the Polish sounding name. Having then built his reputation with the name, it remained.

In Poland, the older generation of musicians remembers Czajkowski first and foremost as a talented pianist. He is perhaps best known for his participation in the Chopin Competition in 1955, where he was awarded 8th prize. A year later, at the equally prestigious Queen Elisabeth Competition in Brussels, he won third place. He then returned briefly to Poland, but in 1957 left his studies with Stefan Askenazy to begin his great international career, thus parting from his country of birth for good.

Three decades later, following Czajkowski's untimely death in 1982 (at age 46), his name reappeared in Poland – surprisingly – in the world of literature. Anita Halina, a friend of the composer's living in Warsaw, released a selection of their rich correspondence, which spanned a quarter century. The letters are a portrait of the two extraordinary personalities and the complex relationship between them. The book, *My Guardian Devil*, was quite successful and has been reprinted a number of times – most recently in 2011. Though the first edition was censored (primarily due to discussions of Czajkowski's sexuality), more recent printings include the complete text. The composer also entered the literary world in Hanna Krall's "Hamlet," from the collection Evidence (a5 Publications, 1995). Here, the story of Andrzej's traumatic childhood is explored. As a seven-year-old, he was led by his grandmother from the Warsaw ghetto disguised as a girl, his hair bleached blonde. Though she also had false papers prepared, his mother chose to remain in the ghetto. It was a past Czajkowski would never escape. During the war he was constantly on the move – hidden for a time in a closet, later in a basement. Immediately after the war, his story – like that of many other surviving children – was recorded and is now stored in the Jewish Historical Institute in Warsaw. After the war, Czajkowski came to hate his grandmother, to whom he owed his life, feeling that she pushed him too hard. She felt that he had to become someone great in order to prove that he deserved the survival that so many others were denied.

The second topic covered in Krall's story is the fact that Czajkowski, who worshipped Shakespeare, bequeathed his own skull to the Royal Shakespeare Company to serve as a prop in Hamlet. Indeed, every now and then it is taken out of storage and becomes the skull of the jester Yorrick. It must be admitted, such a move is unprecedented, and in the United Kingdom – where he settled in the '60s -- Czajkowski is remembered primarily for this story, despite the fact that for decades he was better known there as a musician than he was in Poland.

“He is one of the greatest pianists of his generation, and even more than that: his is a wonderful musician.” So said Arthur Rubinstein of Czajkowski, who he heard perform at the Chopin Competition in 1955, and later in Brussels, where Rubinstein was a member of the jury. Rubinstein was fascinated by the young musician, in whom he saw echoes of himself in his youth. Naturally, he wanted to groom Czajkowski as his successor. He persuaded his impresario, the famous Sol Hurok, to take care of Czajkowski, and similarly appealed to RCA Victor and his friends – including the great conductor Fritz Reiner – for support. Andrzej, however, was not interested in adapting to the commercial market. Although he gave in to the intense cycle to touring and concert life, and on the request of his impresario changed the spelling of his name to “Andre Tchaikowsky” (with a “w,” as opposed to the “v” in Pytor Tchaikovsky), Andrzej never fulfilled Hurok’s dream of staging “Tchaikowsky plays Tchaikovsky.”

It annoyed Czajkowski that his impresario wanted to stage him as the “Anne Frank of the piano,” something he saw as falsifying and embellishing his tragic life. Czajkowski liked to shock, but in a different way. He hated the formality and ceremony of the commercial art world and the banquets of rich American ladies. At one such banquet, he declared: “I am a Communist, I eat with my fingers, I do not bathe, I am a Jew, I believe in equal rights for blacks and whites, and I’m gay.” Czajkowski’s friendship with Rubenstein did not last. After a few provocative statements, Nela Rubinstein banned him from their home. Eventually, Czajkowski began to arrange his own affairs and he did so quite well, though he did not particularly care about his career.

Artists who worked with Czajkowski saw him as a unique personality and forgave him his eccentricities. In discussion at the symposium that accompanied the premiere of “The Merchant of Venice” in Bregenz, conductor Christopher Seaman remarked, “He had an extraordinarily individual style of performance, sense of harmony, and logic of work.” Uri Segal, also a conductor, added that “In fact, he played very classically, meticulously realizing the musical form. He never cultivated virtuosity for the sake of virtuosity.” The famous pianist Andras Schiff, who in his youth participated in master classes conducted by Czajkowski, says, “He never discussed technical matters as separate from the music. He stressed that the piano is a percussion instrument. Even his fortissimos were played with a beautiful sound.”

Renowned chamber music pianist Jerzy Marchwinski, who studied together in Warsaw with Czajkowski, spoke of his interpretation of Chopin’s Sonata in B minor – “His played with extreme economy, it was almost as though his fingers didn’t move at all. I had an almost physical sensation that he was not playing on the keyboard, but rather directly on the strings. Not producing the sounds, but shaping them in his imagination. The music was pure and free from what was then insufferable to me – interpretation.”

Though a respected performer, Czajkowski’s greatest passion was composition. He began composing as a child and later, whenever he wanted to work on some aspect of his playing, he composed etudes for himself – just as Chopin had. At fifteen, Czajkowski volunteered for the Polish Composers’ Union, where he had the audacity to provide a list of works on which most of the items were “missing” or “in preparation.” But the suite, which he presented, left an impression. Jerzy Marchwinski, who in his student days also showed one of the compositions, also was impressed – “I was particularly struck by the drama and expression. Its character was not what I associated with Andrzej. It was a song – whose name I forget – that seemed to come from a different world. I did not know then, but now – ex post – I can see that it revealed his intimate reality, that which was otherwise concealed from the public eye. It was an image of trauma that could not be overcome, of a void that could not be filled. Sometimes I wonder what his work would be like if not for this ghastly, unimaginable trauma in the soul of the Jewish child who experienced the nightmare of the Nazi hell.”

In his early career, Czajkowski performed many of his own compositions, including a youthful piano concerto (which he later dismissed) and a sonata (under the imaginary name Uyu Dal). While living in England, he spent most of the year performing as a pianist; but in the summer, he retired to the comfort of his home and composed. Very self-critical, Czajkowski's oeuvre is comprised of only seven works, mostly chamber music and songs. Some of these were performed during his lifetime and were critically praised (especially his Piano Concerto, the first performance of which was given by the famous pianist Radu Lupu). It was, however, *The Merchant of Venice* op. 7 that consumed most of his time – a composition that for 15 years (up to this year's festival in Bregenz) was never staged. The composer presented excerpts from the opera at the English National Opera, but the institution stated that there was "currently no possibility of a production." Perhaps the opera was deemed insufficiently avant-garde for its time – one can hear in it echoes of Alban Berg, Benjamin Britten, and Paul Hindemith. Today we are able to listen to the music without such biases and appreciate its undeniable value.

Czajkowski's life and works today are making their way into our memory. A comprehensive website andretchaikowsky.com, run by American David Ferré, is updated on a regular basis with new materials, links to articles, and video. A couple books have been written about him, and a documentary film is in the works. In Poland, the pianist Maciej Grzybowski has for years engaged with Czajkowski's work, having become interested in the composer after reading his letters. Grzybowski procured scores to Czajkowski's compositions and not only performs the songs himself (*Inventions of Piano*, *Piano Concerto*), but also promotes them to other musicians and institutions. He organized a monographic concert of chamber works at the Olsztyn Philharmonic, performed Czajkowski's *Piano Concerto* at the festival *Chopin and His Europe*, and has worked to persuade the National Opera (with whom he works) to stage *The Merchant of Venice*.

Grzybowski's efforts have paid off: the Bregenz Festspielhaus premiere of *The Merchant of Venice*, directed by Keith Warner, was produced in cooperation with the Warsaw Opera, where the work will be staged in the autumn of next year. The premiere was accompanied by not only a symposium, but also a series of concerts where *Inventions*, *7 Sonnets of Shakespeare*, *String Quartet No. 2*, *Arioso and Fugue for Solo Clarinet*, and the *Piano Concerto* were performed by Grzybowski and Urszula Kryger, among others.

Everyone was impressed. "I am in shock. I did not expect the work to be so outstanding," said Andras Schiff after the opera premiere. Jerzy Marchwinski added, "It seems to me that I only now understand why Andrzej denied his enormous potential as a pianist. He just had to express his true self in his work, without resorting to other dramas."

Maciej Grzybowski says that in Czajkowski's papers there are yet unknown songs. We await further discoveries.

"The Other Czajkowski"

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