

The Devil's Music

ANDRZEJ CZAJKOWSKI is a composer who is underrated in Poland. His opera "The Merchant of Venice" was recently a sensation in Bregenz, Austria.



ANNA GROMNICKA

The year is 1955 and Andrzej Czajkowski is in Lagrow preparing with his friends for the Chopin Competition. He is 19 years old and a rather strange personality – “diabolical” as his friends would later describe him. One day, dressed as a girl, he jumped from a rock into a lake and upon resurfacing, ran to dress himself. At first, he told his friends, “I think now you will never see that girl.” At the sight of their panicked faces, however, he admitted, “It’s me, I was her.” Soon after experiencing his first affair with a colleague and his first heartbreak, he met Halina Janowska at an academic ball. Upon their second meeting, he asked her to marry him and have his children.

Czajkowski took eighth place in the Chopin Competition and was the youngest winner in the competition’s history. A year later, he traveled to Paris on scholarship, then to a competition in Brussels. From 1960 until his death in 1982, he lived in Great Britain.

Although he was one of the greatest pianists of his generation – alongside Vladimir Ashkenazy, Vladimir Horowitz, and John Browning – Czajkowski shied away from self-promotion. He was very self-critical and couldn’t stand the glitz typical of the salons of classical music lovers. “If only he had another character, he could have had a dazzling career,” said Terry Harrison, Czajkowski’s manager. Arthur Rubinstein, who supported Czajkowski at the beginning of his career, regarded him as “the most wonderful pianist of the twentieth century.” And he was quite right.

MUSIC AS MORPHINE

1956 – The results of the Queen Elisabeth Music

Competition in Brussels are announced. In first place is Vladimir Ashkenazy. John Browning takes second, and in third – Andrzej Czajkowski. It is a great success. It seemed the pianist’s career was off the ground. And it somewhat was. Managers of the greatest concert halls around the world were fighting for Czajkowski. This artistic success, however, cast a shadow over his friendship and relationship with John Browning. The Americans cast off the Pole.

Czajkowski performed everywhere – London, Paris, New York, and Stockholm – and was met with excellent reviews. “His playing was as if from another world. It was more than outstanding. He was a truly inspired artist,” says pianist Maciej Grzybowski, thanks to whom Czajkowski’s “The Merchant of Venice” was premiered this July in Bregenz.

Grzybowski became interested in the composer after reading a collection of letters Czajkowski wrote to his friend Halina Janowska, issued 20 years ago in the volume, “My guardian devil...” “They changed my life,” says Grzybowski, “I did not know it was possible to feel such and to translate these feelings into music.”

I called Halina Janowska and asked her about Czajkowski’s skull, which he bequeathed to the Royal Shakespeare Company upon his death. It now “acts” in “Hamlet.” “He was not without reason, providing them Yorick’s skull,” explains Janowska. “He thought that his tragic life, marked by war and depression, needed balance – even if it was a mockery. Tragedy was offset by the absurd, the comic. Yorick is a symbol of this opposition. Andrzej wanted his skull in that scene to be evidence of breaking down the drama with the jester.”

GAY, JEW, ARTIST

He loved to play the piano, but he did not want to be “only a good pianist,” as he read in reviews. “Thanks to concerts he earned a living, and it was very hard work,” notes Janowska. In truth, however, he wanted to compose. He wanted to be a composer, and so he had to be alone. Is that why nothing came of the promised marriage to Halina Janowska, with whom he exchanged letters for 25 years? “It was impossible to establish a good relationship with him other than at a distance,” says Janowska. “And not because he was gay. He could either be alone, or be with someone and feel deeply unhappy. His late partner, Michael, a doctor and musician, left him and moved to Brazil. Andrzej dominated him, and was frequently moody and aggressive when composing. Nothing else mattered.” “His life was really marked by madness, as is the life of every genius,” adds Maciej Grzybowski.

Andrzej Czajkowski was born in 1935 to a Jewish family in Warsaw as Robert Krauthammer. Before the liquidation of the ghetto, his grandmother, Celina Rappaport-Sandler, moved him to the home of a Polish acquaintance who was pregnant. There the boy was hidden in the closet, where he ate and slept. His grandmother visited young Czajkowski and taught him prayers and told him of the Immaculate Conception until he thought that the pregnancy of the woman hiding him was the result of Immaculate Conception. When he sang her a song about it, she thought the Czajkowski was mocking her and told his grandmother to “Take away this Jewish rubbish.” Celina Rappaport-Sandler threatened that if the boy was forced to leave, he would remember where he had been and might one day tell who hid him in the closet. The woman gave way. Janowska says that memories of this stayed with Czajkowski his whole life. “His mother died in Treblinka. It was a loss with which he never reconciled. He could not understand that she didn’t want to leave the ghetto for the Aryan side,” she adds. “As an adult he told me of the boys who after the war teased him. They told him to pull down his underwear and show them his willy. They beat him. He lived through so much.”

The theme of persecution of the “Jew/himself” is woven into Czajkowski’s “Merchant of Venice.” In Shakespeare’s original text, Shylock, a Jewish merchant, lends the Christian Antonio three-thousand ducats. If he is not repaid the money on time, Shylock reserves the right to collect a pound of human flesh. In Czajkowski’s work, Antonio is figured as a gay man in love with his friend Bassanio. “I’m so sad,” he sings, upon learning that his love is going to marry a woman.

Grzybowski, whose exploration of Czajkowski’s legacy spans a decade, claims that he saw something of Andrzej in the actor that plays the role of Antonio in the production staged in Bregenz. “Not only did I have the impression that the actor was intentionally disguised, but more – the part is sung by a countertenor. In the world of classical music this is considered a voice and personality suspended between masculinity and femininity,” says Grzybowski. “I realized that this opera expresses the essence of Andrzej Czajkowski.” Janowska adds, “For me, it is clear that in “The Merchant” Andrzej tells of the trauma of his whole life, of the persecution that haunted his dreams each night.”

In letters, Czajkowski wrote: “As you know, Rimbaud is...my guardian devil.” In the introduction to the volume of their collected correspondence, Janowska explains: “Why Rimbaud? Because he was an artist, a genius, and a homosexual. He had an unbalanced nature and suffered from depression.... In short, the title is the key to understanding Andrzej’s fate.” He did not accept himself as a gay man. He wanted to start a family and tried to “cure” himself of homosexuality.

DYBBUK [MALEVOLENT SPIRIT] AT DEATH

Music consumed Czajkowski, and it was reflected in his health. “He waited for the holidays, because it was only then that he could compose. He worked all the time,” says his friend. At the age of 46, he already had undergone two operations for cancer. During martial law, Halina Janowska was denied a passport, and letters from Andrzej were confiscated by censors. She had no information about her friend, and only later learned that, nearing death, Czajkowski could only perform Chopin’s Concerto in E minor after an injection of an analgesic.

By 1982, Czajkowski had written seven opuses. According to Grzybowski, there are more compositions by Czajkowski waiting to be discovered. “Andrzej would often send me manuscripts, and some notes,” says Halina Janowska. All of these were gathered after Czajkowski’s death and given to Maciej Grzybowski, who has undertaken the completion and performance of the works.

Shortly before his death, Czajkowski sought to have “The Merchant of Venice” produced at the English National Opera (ENO). He worked to finish the opera in the hospital – but could not, but the work was completed after Czajkowski’s death by Alan Boustead. “Andrzej mortgaged his house to be able to write the piano part to “Merchant...” Janowska recalls. But the ENO refused, claiming it was infeasible. And so Andrzej’s work was lost. For 30 years.

(Translation: Alena Aniskiewicz)