

André Tchaikowsky: the man, the musician and the skull

Choosing a single word to describe André Tchaikowsky is impossible. The man was immensely talented, awkward, intense and conflicted. He was Jewish, Polish, British and homosexual. His career featured him as a concert pianist and composer. He was a gifted writer whose diaries shed light upon nine years of his forty-six-year long life. Tchaikowsky's very first sentence in his diary- "Shall I really start a diary?" - is typically searching. His life is a remarkable story that is only now being told.

The latest event to tell Tchaikowsky's story was an introduction to the composer on the 24th March 2017 at Ognisko Polskie lead by Dr Anastasia Belina-Johnson. The evening's aim was to open eyes to the life and music of Tchaikowsky. A preliminary talk by Belina-Johnson was followed by excerpts from the documentary *Rebel of the Keys*, directed by a British film maker Mark Charles, which covers Tchaikowsky's life. The evening was completed with two fine performances; firstly a composition by Stephen Roche dedicated to Tchaikowsky which was performed by Stephen's brother Henry Roche, and secondly pianist Nico de Villiers accompanied mezzo-soprano Rosanna Cooper in Tchaikowsky's *Seven Sonnets of Shakespeare*. The delivery of *Seven Sonnets of Shakespeare* was utterly gripping, the first few notes disturbing the silence like rain drops. Each of the seven movements delivered a new character and showed the two performers to be accomplished musicians. Rosanna's delivery of crucial words such as "divine" and "death" demonstrated superb technical ability which created a captivating and tense atmosphere. The evening served its function admirably as providing an insight into the world of André Tchaikowsky, and given the event's aim it is only suitable for the remainder of this article to recount the story of Tchaikowsky further.

Born on the 1st November 1935 in Warsaw, Tchaikowsky, or Robert Andrzej Krauthammer as he was named at birth, found himself enclosed in the Warsaw ghetto along with his mother Felicja Krauthammer after the Nazi invasion of Poland in September 1939. At this time Tchaikowsky's mother began teaching him the piano but this tuition ended as soon as the war began. His departure from the ghetto in August 1942 was the last time he saw his mother: she was murdered at Treblinka death camp later that year. Accompanied by Celina Sandler, his grandmother, Tchaikowsky spent the next three years in hiding in various locations. On one occasion Tchaikowsky spent a number of weeks hiding in a wardrobe, but the exact length of this experience is not known. He later recalled in his diaries that- "there weren't any days in the wardrobe, or any hours: the dark was always equally complete."



Tchaikowsky in Warsaw, Poland age 3 (1938).

The years following the Second World War saw Tchaikowsky begin his career as a pianist. He studied with Emma Altberg at Łódź Academy of Music in Poland and then at the Paris Conservatoire in 1948. Tchaikowsky's interest soon split between performing and composing. His early works include a *Concerto for Violin and Orchestra*, *Variations on a Theme of Handel* and numerous piano sonatas. The Polish composer Zygmunt Mycielski commented that Tchaikowsky "possesses a great talent, musicality, and originality" and Tchaikowsky's return to Warsaw in 1951 saw him commence joint composition and piano studies at the State Academy of Music. In 1957 Tchaikowsky left Warsaw and eventually settled in England in 1963: his reason for leaving Warsaw is unknown but the link between the city and his mother's death is likely to be a key factor. His departure from Warsaw witnessed Tchaikowsky establishing himself internationally: his English debut was in 1958 at the Royal Festival Hall playing Sergei Prokofiev's *Piano Concerto No.2*. The following years saw Tchaikowsky giving recitals across the world playing with orchestras such as the BBC Symphony Orchestra, Berlin Philharmonic, London Symphony Orchestra, National Orchestra of Ireland, New York Philharmonic and Vienna Symphony. He gave performances in the Netherlands, New Zealand and Australia to name but a few. Throughout these years Tchaikowsky remained committed to composition and Terry Harrison, Tchaikowsky's London-based manager, recalled that Tchaikowsky "became obsessed that he was falling behind with his composing, and would turn down things." Those "things" were concerts and combined with his socio-culturally inappropriate behaviour Tchaikowsky did a great deal to sabotage his own career. On one occasion Tchaikowsky played the entire *Goldberg Variations* as a punishment for receiving what he considered to be only modest applause. Stories such as this are abundant throughout his career which in 1982 took a turn for the worse. Tchaikowsky's doctor originally diagnosed colitis but it soon became clear he was suffering from colon cancer. On 26th June 1982 Tchaikowsky died aged 46. Tchaikowsky's name, however, came to public attention in 2008 when his skull, which he donated to the Royal Shakespeare Company, made an appearance in *Hamlet* in the hands of David Tennant.

Tchaikowsky's career was short but by no means lacking in promise and accomplishment. His ability as a pianist, composer and writer should not be easily forgotten. Now that Tchaikowsky's name is reappearing we should all make an effort to listen and learn about his remarkable story.

Tchaikowsky's opera *The Merchant of Venice* will be performed on the 19th and 20th July 2017 at the Royal Opera House.



Tchaikowsky practicing in Oslo, Norway age 46 (1981).