

Demons that so haunted and then inspired a survivor

By Gloria Tessler, June 8, 2015



Morbid: David Tennant used the composer's skull in his 'Hamlet'

It may seem strange that three Jewish composers based operas on Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice*. But, among them, André Tchaikowsky was unique.

A child survivor of the Warsaw Ghetto, his opera was performed at Warsaw's Wielki Theatre last October conducted by Lionel Friend, and premiered the previous year at the Bregenz Festival in Austria. Welsh National Opera is to stage the work next year for the 400th anniversary of Shakespeare's death.

Tchaikowsky was known for his love of Shakespeare. And it has perhaps taken a Nazi survivor to reflect a more subtle and sympathetic view of Shylock. A protégé of distinguished pianist Artur Schnabel, Tchaikowsky finished the opera days before his death from colon cancer in 1982 at the age of 46. The final 24 measures of orchestration were completed posthumously by composer Alan Bousted.

A new book, *My Guardian Demon*, based on a 25-year correspondence between the composer and Halina Janowska, his muse and not-quite-lover, sheds light on the complexity of his personality, his homosexuality, her doomed, immersive infatuation. It also reflects the difficulties he experienced as a child in the ghetto.

Born into a secular Warsaw Jewish family in 1935, André did not arrive with that portentous name. He was saddled with it by his grandmother to deflect Nazi attention from his actual Jewish name Robert Andrzej Krauthammer, and with a touch of whimsy since the young boy had already proved to be a phenomenally gifted pianist. He was hidden by his enterprising grandmother and later smuggled out of Warsaw in a dustbin. His parents were divorced; his mother died in the Holocaust, for which her son could never forgive her, since he felt she could have saved herself earlier, and he was estranged for years from his father who survived.

'He was rated as one of the finest pianists of his age'

Apart from composing, Tchaikowsky was an award-winning pianist. He wrote to Janowska compulsively from the international concert circuit and from his home in Cumnor near

Oxford, addressing her as "Darling Funnyface". She remained in Warsaw, where they had met as piano students, but took a different route into criminology and writing. His letters reveals his torment at struggling to find time to complete his opera with a busy concert schedule. In fact he spent as long on his correspondence with Janowska as he did working on his opera.

According to Judi Arnold, his personal assistant, the pair met rarely but, when they did, they could not bear each other's company. Their meetings ended in mutual recrimination. They dreamed of having a child together but Janowska tried to sever contact with the tempestuous composer telling him that "we are both mythomaniacs, longing for something real that is a virtual impossibility."

Tchaikowsky was described by Rubinstein as "one of the finest pianists of his generation - more than that - a wonderful musician".

In his letters, the composer, a combustible, egotistic and child-like personality, considers writing his autobiography but confesses he finds his early childhood the hardest part. "I remember little from that childhood and what I do remember I don't like – Darling, perhaps you'll remind me when exactly the Warsaw Ghetto began? Did we have to wear armbands in the ghetto as well? I seem to remember that we did, but I can't be sure".

Later he speaks of being reconciled with the feisty and fearless grandmother who saved his life.

"The fact that they killed her children isn't even the worst", he writes. "The crux of the matter is that she didn't die herself. And what did she live for? Nobody wanted her, I least of all, but she did live, unwanted, sick, chronically exhausted, without hope, without a moment's rest: she was fat, ugly, stupid, vulgar, hysterical, shameless -and brave, infinitely brave". Was this woman the subconscious Shylock he would develop in his opera - an icon of his own conflicted Jewishness?

"I have never felt at home anywhere," he tells Janowska. "Neither among Poles, nor among Jews, nor among homosexuals – everything isolated me somehow".

Why did Tchaikowsky choose The Merchant? Some critics suggest his Shylock was driven to insane acts by what was thrust upon him.

The opera opens and closes with a "neurotic" Antonio, in love with his cousin Bassanio, in a session with his analyst. This could chime with André's own lifelong depression, his conflicted attraction to young girls and his true homosexual nature, which Janowska appears to have some difficulty accepting.

"That this play, with all its problematic associations with antisemitism should be written by a survivor of the Warsaw Ghetto is peculiarly piquant", says Bregenz festival artistic director David Pountney.

Tchaikowsky's ultimate view of Shylock is sympathetic, more sinned against than sinning. "Shylock is interesting because he's a character who acquires a tragic dimension through the way in which he's treated in the trial scene," Pountney adds, "even if he's a tragic victim of his own making".

Music critics at the Bregenz world premiere noted the complex atonal music, recalling Alban Berg, and the lugubrious, vaguely Oriental theme on woodwind, signifying Shylock's Jewishness, a character with whom the composer was understood to identify, implicitly because of the Nazi antisemitism which he had suffered, if briefly.

References from Beethoven, the other Tchaikovsky and Wagner were also observed, recalling the European culture which was an integral part of the composer's life.

As an example of his morbid wit André Tchaikowsky bequeathed his skull to the Royal Shakespeare Company, for the "Alas Poor Yorick" scene in Hamlet.

The gesture was rejected until actor David Tennant used the skull when he played Hamlet in 2008. It has never been used since.