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**“Peter Tchaikovsky, A Master of Classical Beauty”**

by Scott Smith

Peter Tchaikovsky wanted to compose music, but had three strikes against him:

- No classes were available.
- His parents wanted him to be practical, so sent him to law school.
- When he left it to pursue his muse, he found himself distracted by critics and a turbulent life.

“But he was profoundly introverted, as many deeply creative people are, which allowed him to concentrate in a way that most normal human beings can't,” Roland John Wiley, author of “Tchaikovsky,” told IBD.

Using that fierce focus, he produced some of the world's most beautiful music, including “Swan Lake,” “The Nutcracker” and the Violin Concerto.

Tchaikovsky (1840-93) grew up in rural Russia. His father, a mining executive, and his mother, who had musical talent, arranged for the boy to have piano lessons by age 5.

He could read music as well as his teacher within three years. But the professor didn't think he was a prodigy who could make a living playing. Most full-time musicians were imported from Western Europe, and no professional composers existed in Russia.

### **Tchaikovsky's Keys**

Composer of classical masterpieces such as “The Sleeping Beauty” and the Violin Concerto.

Overcame: Disdain of Western classical music among Russian composers.

Lesson: Synthesize the best of your worlds to produce innovation.

“Inspiration is a guest that does not willingly visit the lazy.”

So at 10 he went to a boarding school that would prep him to become a civil servant. He reacted hysterically to the sense of abandonment and four years later to the death of his mother.

### **All in His Head**

“Even by the frankly modest mental health standards of major composers, Tchaikovsky was a genuine neurotic,” said Robert Greenberg, author of the Teaching Co. audio course “The 30 Greatest Orchestral Works.” “He was oversensitive to the point of mania. ... This served him because he believed in the Romantic era view of musical composition as an act of self-confession, and his personal drama gave his work emotional intensity.”

While attending law school in Moscow, Tchaikovsky kept taking piano lessons. That proved beneficial. In 1862, Czar Alexander II opened the St. Petersburg Conservatory to provide professional training in all aspects of music. Tchaikovsky attended classes in composition while keeping his government job for another year.

When he entered music full time, he wrote his sister, “Whether I shall be a famous composer or an impoverished teacher, I shall still think I have done the right thing.”

Over the next two years he gained the professional tools he needed to become the first full-time composer in Russian history, combining native music with Western traditions — to the point where other Russians thought he was too compromising with the West.

“Some composers of his day, such as Modest Mussorgsky and Alexander Borodin, disdained professional training and rejected Western methods of musical expression,” said Ralph Locke, professor of musicology at **Eastman School of Music** in Rochester, N.Y. “But Tchaikovsky was eager to learn what we today would call best practices in his field. So he studied basic principles of musical construction and style as demonstrated by composers such as Mozart and Mendelssohn and showed a masterful command of the craft.”

Kenneth Sarch, professor of violin and viola and conductor of the string chamber orchestra at Pennsylvania’s Mansfield University, said: “He worked very hard to understand harmony and form, learn the flute and organ, master the art of conducting and accept criticism about how to improve his compositions. When his third opera was poorly reviewed, he admitted its shortcomings, and his next one won first prize in a national competition.”

Tchaikovsky’s first composition recognized as a classic was the overture “Romeo and Juliet” in 1869.

In 1874, he played a first draft of his Piano Concerto No. 1 for Nikolay Rubinstein, head of the conservatory. He told Tchaikovsky it was “no good at all, impossible to play, with many awkward passages,” and offered to fix it.

Tchaikovsky refused to let him change a single note. Later, he encountered the same criticism of his Violin Concerto.

His firm stand proved correct.

“Both works were soon hailed as masterpieces and today are considered two of his most beloved works in the entire repertory,” said Sarch.

Tchaikovsky’s lesson is to be open to criticism until you rise beyond its limitations.

In 1877, at age 37, he found himself on the rebound from an opera star he was engaged to who ended up marrying someone else. So he decided to wed a former student, Antonina Miliukova.

She turned out to be mentally disturbed, and they were badly mismatched in every way. Devastated, Tchaikovsky left 11 weeks later and traveled through Western Europe for a year.

He used this time to compose three masterworks, the Violin Concerto, the Symphony No. 4 and the opera “Eugene Onegin.”

Despite his stress, he had the discipline to be productive. Wiley cautions that the argument that all his music had direct motivation from his life has been overstated.

### **Musical Strokes**

“He had the facility to write a piano piece as Picasso could make a drawing, on sheer technique without a biographical trace,” he said. “Many pieces were motivated by commerce; others were manifestly about solving artistic challenges.”

Tchaikovsky’s lesson is to discipline yourself to reach your goals, no matter the obstacles.

Before Tchaikovsky left Russia for his year sojourn, Nadezhda von Meck, the wealthy widow of a railroad tycoon, had been in touch by letter to express her love for his music. She began paying him a generous annual subsidy, and for the next 13 years this let him concentrate on his art.

Although Tchaikovsky composed on a secluded estate for periods, and despite his natural introversion, he was not isolated, said Wiley: “He was a well-networked musician interacting constantly with other professionals in and outside Russia,” including conducting his works on tours around Europe.

In 1880, at the dedication of the Pushkin Monument in Moscow, novelist Fyodor Dostoevsky declared that the poet Alexander Pushkin had given a prophetic call to Russia to unify with the West.

### **On the Map**

The message spread through the country, with Tchaikovsky suddenly celebrated as a bridge to the West and Russia's top composer.

The same year, with the 25th anniversary of the coronation of Alexander II imminent, Tchaikovsky was commissioned to compose the "1812 Overture," commemorating the defeat of Napoleon's invading army. An audience favorite today, its martial sounds accompany fireworks spectacles at summer festivals around the world.

In 1888, just before Nadezhda began having problems sending her annuity, Czar Alexander III granted Tchaikovsky a lifetime pension. By then, the composer stood in a pantheon for the ages.

"His willingness to innovate led him to enrich a genre that had not been taken very seriously before: ballet," said Locke. "His 'Swan Lake' and 'The Nutcracker' contain some of the most passionate and colorful music ever written for the dance, and later ballets — like Stravinsky's 'The Firebird' and Ravel's 'Daphnis and Chloe' — are indebted to Tchaikovsky's example. His ballet scores are so strong that substantial selections from them are often performed as concert pieces, without any dancing."

In 1891, Tchaikovsky traveled to New York City to conduct his own works at four inaugural concerts at the new Carnegie Hall.

He was astonished by America, says Wiley: the skyscrapers, hot and cold running water, electric and gas lighting. The Russian also conducted in Baltimore, Philadelphia and Washington, D.C., and was impressed by the awe in his music in an alien culture so far from his country.

The seeds he planted flourished. Today, with his music familiar from movies and ads, Tchaikovsky is second only to Beethoven as the most popular classical composer in North America, contends Wiley.

Tchaikovsky died of cholera at age 53. Conspiracy theories that he committed suicide or was murdered don't hold up under scrutiny, according to Wiley's analysis.

Beyond that, Wiley lauds the composer: "All but the most prejudiced observer recognizes the boldness of his thinking in symphonic writing, concertante and the theater. The appeal of his music transcends the generations."

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