

THE SYMPHONY No. 6 IN B MINOR, OPUS 74 (PATHÉTIQUE)

On the 21st of April this year I conducted Tchaikovsky's *Pathétique* for the first time; the concert took place in Tokyo and was recorded. A few days after my return to France I dozed off at the steering wheel of my car as I was driving along a motorway. Tchaikovsky died eight days after the première of the *Pathétique* that he had conducted himself.

Let us suppose the above paragraph were the finale of my last symphony, its fourth movement. Here is the third movement:

How easy it is to play the piano or any other instrument! You just listen to yourself. A great Russian pianist, Sofronitsky, said he played his best recitals when he was able to listen to himself from afar—as if someone else was playing in his stead.

Conducting an orchestra is even less wearisome. Conductors and their orchestras can play Tchaikovsky's Sixth ten times in a row on a world tour.

Performing artists do not need inspiration. When practising at home, they rely upon the text which gives them an opportunity to deal with technical problems at least. Besides, they are allowed to lean upon the author's shoulder, as it were: he supplies all the notes.

Performing artists need not invoke the muses or Apollo.

They can easily murder a piece they perform, but nothing prevents music lovers from enjoying what they listen to: postmodernists maintain that there is no difference between the low and high cultures. Or between good and bad performances. You murder the difference and get away with it.

Playfully entitled *Différance*¹—a postmodernist homage to Jacques Derrida—this text was not written about the *Pathétique* and actually has no link with the present essay except that it does not match the opening paragraph, creating a contrast which may remind us of what happens in Tchaikovsky's *Symphony*: the third movement seems to be *inserted* into it. It should be performed by a village orchestra that is supposed to add a finishing touch to some celebration. (I was delighted to find a discreetly 'dirty' chord in the recording of the Tokyo concert.) In the Soviet film *Tchaikovsky* this piece resounds off-screen while its author, borne shoulder-high, is forthwith

¹ 'Ce qui s'écrit ici *différance* marque l'étrange mouvement, l'unité irréductiblement impure d'un *différer* (détour, délai, délégation, division, inégalité, espacement) dont l'économie excède les ressources déclarées du logos classique. C'est ce mouvement qui donne unité aux essais ici enchaînés.' That is how Derrida explains the word he coined in relation to his work *L'écriture et la différence*. In a way this *mouvement* imparts unity to Tchaikovsky's *Symphony* and my essay.

awarded an honorary doctorate at Cambridge. And in the very next sequence (or *sequenza*) his solitary figure walks along the snow-covered pavements of St Petersburg; the wind is picking up. It is as if the third movement were played not only in another symphony but in another country.

Even Shakespeare was unable to reveal the true nature of hope with such uncompromising realism: the word 'hope' is indissolubly associated—at least in the mind of a Christian—with one of the three theological virtues.

*Hope: he is a flatterer,
A parasite, a keeper-back of Death,
Who gently would dissolve the bands of life
Which false Hope lingers in extremity.*

(Richard II, II, ii, 69-72)

So why did Tchaikovsky insert this movement into his most tragic symphony? For the sake of violent romantic contrast? In search of overall balance? Or did he just pull out all the stops as if to indulge in the intoxicating freedom for which Dostoevsky's characters are justly renowned all over the world? Actually it is hard to avoid a kitschy comparison when probing into Tchaikovsky's motives because his music has often been branded as a symbol of kitsch, his detractors mainly resorting to kitschy arguments. Let us try to break out of this vicious circle. (In a way, the *Sixth Symphony* is another expression of a vicious circle: the finale returns to the initial Angst *despite* the third movement.)

Impossible to grasp the concept 'kitsch' in a free-floating aesthetic way. The social moment is essentially constitutive of it. For by serving up past formal entities as contemporary, it has a social function—to deceive people about their true situation, to transfigure their existence, to allow intentions that suit some powers or other to appear to them in a fairy-tale glow...Music is very much a part of all this. It is assigned the task, above all, of eliciting the impression of collective commitment by means of the preservation of old and superannuated formal types; of employing individual means of expression—such as romantic harmonies and today, already, impressionist harmonies—at a moment when they have come loose from their original formal contexts and can circulate like a kind of musical small change; of utilising melodic arcs that still bear traces of their former emotional significance conventionally as mere phrases.

(Theodor W. Adorno, Kitsch, translated by Susan H. Gillespie)

Adorno wrote his essay on kitsch in 1932 when impressionist harmonies might have been toyed with to pander

to the multitude, creating another fairy-tale of sorts. In Tchaikovsky's days there were no impressionist harmonies one could rely upon to deceive a listener hankering after aesthetic (or ethical) truth. But in nineteenth-century Russia a composer was likely to serve up 'past formal entities as contemporary' without knowing it: any backward country traditionally gives birth to radical innovators on the one hand—Mussorgsky, for instance—and to innocent traditionalists on the other. Actually Russia's proverbial *otstalost'* (backwardness) was instrumental in creating the 'Great Russian Literature' that enlarged upon *spiritual* problems—sometimes to the detriment of romantic predicaments judiciously tackled by Stendhal and Flaubert.

Schopenhauer deplores the longevity of some errors that appeal to the multitude and besmirch the history of mankind for decades, if not for centuries. 'In style, grammar, and orthography,' he writes, 'there are such whims that have a life of only three or four years. In the case of more egregious errors, we are, of course, bound to lament the shortness of human life, but shall always do well to lag behind our own times when we see these about to go backwards. For there are two different ways of not standing *au niveau de son temps*, either below or above them.' Tchaikovsky often remains below his times or any other times as if aware that no times, however auspicious, can accomplish anything except the destruction of former times. In this respect he is the first postmodernist composer. His sincerity or seriousness, which is not mirrored in my sentence 'Conducting an orchestra is even less wearisome', imparts to the third movement of his last symphony a prophetic touch: aren't we too presumptuous and optimistic today? We should listen more often to the finale of the *Pathétique* that follows a bombastic statement akin to what one may hear today when taking notice of G. W. Bush's speeches.

It is better to lag behind the times during which so many egregious errors are committed. Even in the nineteenth century a slow pace was advisable, given the outraging results of so-called progress. Tchaikovsky was lagging behind the times; his interminable sequenzas are pathetically naïve compared with Flaubert's irony and Brahms' attachment to counterpoint, let alone Wagner's chromatisms. Let me insert yet another text into this patchy homage to the *Sixth Symphony*.

The world is a spinning die, and everything turns and changes: man is turned into angel, and angel into man, and the head into the foot, and the foot into the head. Thus all things turn and spin and change, this into that, and that into this, the topmost to the undermost, and the undermost to the topmost. For at the root all is one, and salvation inheres in the change and return of things.

(Martin Buber, Ten Rungs: Hasidic Sayings, translated by Olga Marx)

In Tchaikovsky's *Fifth* it is demons that turn into angels: eventually the *Fatum*-leitmotiv becomes a triumphant march. In the *Pathétique* all things spin and change, the topmost to the undermost, and the undermost to the topmost—on account of proverbial sequenzas. (First movement, the closing of the development; the climax of the finale.) These sequenzas have nothing to do with yoga or

hysterics; they reflect our life, our feet and head. And Tchaikovsky's monothematism reminds us

that at the root all is one and salvation inheres in the change and return of things.

So let us return to the third movement. Should a conductor begin the finale at once—*attaca*—so as to emphasise the contrast? Or should he or she make a long pause?

Suppose you attend a cocktail party where you encounter a woman you loved many years ago. Now she is old and ugly. A shock. *Attaca*. Traditionally performers do not wait too long between a finale and a movement preceding it.

Heidegger describes a person who comes home after a dinner party where he enjoyed himself. After a while he realises he did *not* enjoy himself as Time continues to obliterate everything both inside and outside. A long pause; a blank space.

The way in this world is like the edge of a blade. On this side is the underworld, and on that side is the underworld, and the way of life lies between.

(Martin Buber, Ten Rungs: Hasidic Sayings)

In the second movement perhaps.

September 13, 2005

Versailles

Valery Afanassiev

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to be 'Valery Afanassiev', written in a cursive style.