THE 2007 HOEFER PRIZES
FOR EXCELLENCE IN UNDERGRADUATE WRITING

IN RECOGNITION OF WRITING ACHIEVEMENT IN THE
UNDERGRADUATE FIELD OF STUDY

STANFORD UNIVERSITY
MAY 23, 2007
Hermeneutics of Autobiography and Programme in Tchaikovsky’s *Romeo and Juliet* Overture-Fantasy

WILLIAM CHENG

Music 148
*Musical Shakespeare: Theater, Song, Opera, Film*

THOMAS S. GREY
DEPARTMENT OF MUSIC
Nadezhda von Meck once wrote to Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky that she “knew of no man ... for whom the correspondence, the impeccable balance between the inner being and its external manifestations were more perfect”. Indeed, for Tchaikovsky, an unceasing series of romances and tragedies throughout his life surely inspired his craft and often even informed his musical choices. Among his output, the *Pathétique* Symphony, his final major composition, has provoked to this day the most explicit and controversial criticisms regarding the work’s role as a medium of autobiographical confession. Tchaikovsky confirmed that the symphony had a programme but infamously refused to divulge its nature, opting instead to allow it to “remain an enigma to all; let them guess it who can”. Posterity has long since risen to the challenge and generated a variety of hypotheses concerning the programme that Tchaikovsky supposedly had in mind: many historians have postulated that Tchaikovsky wrote the *Pathétique* as a farewell or suicide note, while others have chosen to regard the work as a manifestation of his homosexual frustrations resulting from his unrequited erotic love for his nephew, Bob Davydov.  

---

1. 


3. As Alexander Poznansky suggests in his groundbreaking excavatory biography, *Tchaikovsky: The Quest for the Inner Man*: “It is to Bob Davydov that the Sixth Symphony is dedicated. Arguably, it was only now that the aging composer recognized the full extent of his longing for Bob, even as he faced the unlikelihood of its physical fulfillment. Tchaikovsky’s letters and diaries leaves no doubt that not only did he adore Bob but he also felt for him a homoerotic passion as strong as any of which he was capable. In the Sixth Symphony ... Tchaikovsky embodied the anguish of unrequited love, a conflict between platonic passion and the desires of the flesh, held forcibly in check so as not to profane the sublimity of passion.” Alexander Poznansky, *Tchaikovsky: The Quest for the Inner Man* (New York: Schirmer Books of Macmillan Inc., 1991) 558-59.
Even for cases in which confessional intent likely exists, musicologists in the past century have been wary of attempts to forge connections between autobiography and programme. Perhaps the skepticism stems from the intangible nature of any evidence aiming to bridge these two hermeneutic spheres, or perhaps there exists a broader and subtler fear of contaminated perceptions – that no matter what formalists might claim, their way of listening to a musical work will invariably be swayed by the disclosure of the composer’s biographical details. Autobiographical hermeneutics, after all, is a fluid practice, unstable at best. The premiere of the *Pathétique* on 28 October 1893 in St. Petersburg, for instance, received only a lukewarm response, but its subsequent performance on 18 November under the baton of Eduard Nápravník made, according to Modest Tchaikovsky, a “powerful and thrilling impression”.

Despite Tchaikovsky’s own admission that he had “put [his] whole soul into this work”, the premiere garnered little critical attention, and only after the composer’s death (6 November 1893) did Nápravník’s *in memoriam* performance transform the symphony into a dignified dirge in the minds of the thousands of mourners who attended the concert.

In his *Oxford History of Western Music*, Richard Taruskin presents two composer-composition relations that appear to defy any obvious affective correlations:

Beethoven’s Second, one of his most cheerful (and in the finale, downright hilarious) works, was composed concurrently with the composer’s despairing realization, attended by thoughts of suicide and expressed in his heart-rending “Heiligenstadt Testament”, that his deafness was irrevocable. The agonizing, heart-rending finale of Chaikovsky’s Sixth Symphony, by contrast, was composed during as happy a period as the composer ever knew.

---

4 Modest further noted that “at the concert on the [28th] the work fell rather flat. It was applauded and the composer was recalled; but the enthusiasm did not surpass what was usually shown for one of Tchaikovsky’s new works” (Tchaikovsky 719-20).

5 Tchaikovsky 716.

A study of the intersections between autobiography and programme proves a challenging and controversial task in considering the music of any composer. However, this is especially true for Tchaikovsky, whose life and music conceivably constitute an ideal framework for such considerations but, at the same time, also deploy a veritable minefield of hermeneutic traps. Nonetheless, as I will demonstrate, autobiographical hermeneutics, when employed creatively and with discretion, can open up compelling avenues for analysis and lend itself to profound means of aesthetic understanding.

In this paper, I seek to conduct a comprehensive study of Tchaikovsky’s *Romeo and Juliet* Overture-Fantasy within a liberal hermeneutic frame, addressing problematic abstractions pertinent to the intersection of autobiography and programme. Given its popularity in today’s concert halls, there has been an odd lacuna of respectable scholarship on this overture, which represented a milestone in Tchaikovsky’s artistic maturity and career. And just as Tchaikovsky wrote the *Pathétique* at a decisive moment in his life, so he composed *Romeo and Juliet* during a period marked by his first serious foray into an actively sexual lifestyle, as well as arguably his first endeavour to sublimate, via his infatuation with Désirée Artôt, his homosexual tendencies. Without necessarily confirming the overture to be Tchaikovsky’s “coming out” manifesto, I will show the many ways in which the musical-programmatic choices within this pivotal work reflect Tchaikovsky’s character and the imposing circumstances at the time.
Tchaikovsky’s Romeo(s) and Juliet

Many historians have insisted that Tchaikovsky could not have composed Romeo and Juliet, an overture-fantasy based on one of the most popular literary epitomizations of tragic love, without turning to his own romantic experiences for inspiration. Alexander Poznansky maintains that

Here, for the first time, [Tchaikovsky] voiced the main emotional themes of all his subsequent oeuvre – the psychological drama of unfulfilled and frustrated love and of impossible youthful passion consumed by omnipresent death.⁷

With keen discretion, Poznansky describes the thematic contents of Romeo and Juliet – heartache, passion, and so on – without reflexively attributing them to events in Tchaikovsky’s life. He wisely cautions that “a work of art nearly always obscures and transcends the experience that gives impetus to its composition” before accepting the inevitable reality that “still, from the point of view of creative psychology, the two realms must necessarily be connected, however mysteriously or unpredictably”.⁸

With or without these caveats in mind, historians have traditionally focused on three of Tchaikovsky’s relationships as the motivational sources for Romeo and Juliet: most prominently, Tchaikovsky’s short-lived infatuation with Désirée Artôt, a Paris-born Belgian mezzo-soprano trained by Pauline Viardot-Garcia; secondly, Tchaikovsky’s love for Eduard Zak, a young teenager whose mysterious suicide in November of 1873 would evoke, whether causally or coincidentally, a prophetic ring to the overture’s programme; and lastly, perhaps least substantially, the alleged unrequited passion that Tchaikovsky harbored for one of his old schoolfriends, Vladimir Gerard.

⁷ Poznansky, Tchaikovsky: The Quest for the Inner Man 119.
⁸ Ibid.
Artôt

Although Tchaikovsky first met Désirée Artôt at a dinner party that Mariya Begicheva hosted in honour of Artôt’s successful 1868 debut in Moscow, he only first mentioned Artôt in his letters to Modest and Anatoli later that year as he was completing his first sketches of the tone-poem *Fatum* (1868). From Tchaikovsky’s accounts and numerous eyewitness reports, the relationship between Tchaikovsky and Artôt began passionately – albeit in neither an overtly sexual nor a strictly platonic manner – and ended in something like polite indifference. In a letter to Modest in November, Tchaikovsky ardently praises the singer and makes her out to be some sort of temptress:

> Ach! Medenka! I simply must pour out all my feelings into your artistic soul. If you only knew what a singer and actress Désirée Artôt is! In all my life I have never before been under the spell of such an artist. And I am sorry that you neither can hear nor see her. How charmed you would be by the grace of her movements ... even were you to see her in repose.9

The following month, in a long letter to his father, Ilya Petrovich, Tchaikovsky already begins to express some hesitation regarding his growing intimacy with Artôt:

> Since then I got little notes nearly every day from her inviting me to come and gradually I got used to spending every evening with her. Soon we were inflamed by the same feelings for each other and exchanged mutual confessions of love. Naturally the question of marriage arose. It is what we both wish and will take place in the summer, if nothing comes to prevent it. But unfortunately there are complications. First of all my mother who is always with her, has a great influence over her daughter and is against our marriage; she finds me too young and probably fears that I shall force Artôt to live in Russia. Secondly, my friends, and especially [Nikolay] Rubinstein, are doing all they possibly can to prevent me from realizing this plan. They say that becoming the husband of a famous singer I shall have to play the miserable part of my wife’s husband – i.e. will have to travel with her to all the corners of Europe, live on her money, lose the habit of work and stop doing so; in one word, that when my love for her cools there will only be left hurt pride, despair and ruin.10

It is not necessary to probe too deeply into the above words to ascertain that there exists, beneath Tchaikovsky’s disappointed tone, a drop of doubt and a hint of relief. While Artôt’s mother did wield a considerable degree of control over her daughter’s courtships

---

10 Ibid. 45-46.
(as she later approved and assisted the marriage of Artôt and Mariano Padilla, a Spanish baritone), I find it difficult – not to say bitterly ironic – to suppose that Tchaikovsky, soon to compose his overture imbued with a romantic apotheosis, would have allowed familial, practical, and geographical impediments to dissolve such a magnificent attachment – if it had been, in truth, a real love.\footnote{11 Among the works explicitly dedicated to Artôt were Tchaikovsky’s \textit{Romance} for piano, Op. 5 and the \textit{Six Romances}, Op. 65. David Brown offers, in his own words, “inconclusive” evidence regarding Tchaikovsky’s use of cipher-generated motifs based on Artôt’s name in \textit{Fatum} and the First Piano Concerto. David Brown, \textit{Tchaikovsky: The Early Years} (London: Victor Gollancz Ltd., 1998) 197-200.}

David Brown deduces from the letters Tchaikovsky wrote to Ilya Petrovich that his “passion for [Artôt] was not overmastering. [Tchaikovsky] is rather embarrassed by the whole affair, tries to place the onus for initiating it upon the lady, and despite the attractions which he says she has for him (whatever their nature), he will not sacrifice all for the possession of her”.\footnote{Ibid. 156.} Because we cannot possibly judge the ‘realness’ of subjective emotions, we can only question, on this note, the extent to which Tchaikovsky might have been less than wholly honest with himself. Scarcely one month would pass since his letter to his father before Tchaikovsky would write again to Modest and relate, with jovial inflections, his breakup with Artôt:

\begin{quote}
The episode with Artôt is finished in the most amusing way. In Warsaw she fell in love with the baritone Padilla whom she used to laugh at here – and is going to marry him! What a lady! One must know all the particulars of our relationship to understand how ridiculous the end of it all is.\footnote{Von Meck 49.}
\end{quote}

However amicable and good-humoured Artôt might have been, that she became engaged to another man while still ambiguously involved with Tchaikovsky should hardly have elicited from her ex-fiancé only well wishes and a matching \textit{joie de vivre}. Though Tchaikovsky had reacted with a distressed silence when Nikolay Rubinstein blithely
informed him about Artôt’s plans to marry Padilla, Konstantin de Lazari would later testify that it did not take long for Tchaikovsky to regain his composure. As Poznansky suggests, Tchaikovsky’s “behavior following the rupture suggests that [he] was not so much suffering the pain of a lost love as smarting from ... humiliation and betrayal”\textsuperscript{14}.

The underlying tone of Tchaikovsky’s words to Modest intimates, though in no way confirms, the sense that the aversion of his near-marriage with Artôt proved more of a relief than a disappointment in light of his homosexuality. Indeed, in two subsequent reflections upon his feelings towards Artôt, Tchaikovsky would admit that he had misconstrued his feelings for her, that the love he had felt for her had not, in retrospect, been genuine. That which remains unclear is whether Tchaikovsky’s hindsight provides an accurate assessment of the feelings that he was experiencing at the time of his involvement with Artôt\textsuperscript{15}. At various later points in his life, Tchaikovsky would see Artôt again, and each time his sentiments would waver between indifference, cordiality, and even mild resentment\textsuperscript{16}.

It is tempting to conclude, as many biographers have done, that Tchaikovsky loved not Artôt herself but what she personified: the seductive powers of beautiful music, the diva-esque lifestyle, and a certain kind of West European exoticism and eroticism. This conveniently explains away any discrepancies between the homosexual tendencies of Tchaikovsky and his attraction to Artôt. Adhering stubbornly to such oversimplification (and what is worse, abstract oversimplification) signifies a terrible

\textsuperscript{14} Poznansky, Tchaikovsky: The Quest for the Inner Man 114.

\textsuperscript{15} Ibid. 115-16.

\textsuperscript{16} The harshest words that Tchaikovsky probably ever expressed about Artôt were found in a letter, dated October 1869, in which he writes to Anatoli that Artôt had inexplicably “done [him] great harm”. This seemingly sudden antipathy towards Artôt arose while Tchaikovsky was composing Romeo and Juliet during the autumn of 1869. What the connections might be, if there exists any, must be mainly speculative (Von Meck 54).
hypocrisy, in that defending one part of Tchaikovsky’s identity – his homosexuality – comes at the expense of preserving, or at least aiming for, some larger truths regarding his character. If Tchaikovsky did have some heterosexual tendencies, such as those he claimed to have towards Artôt, then we should not trivialize this aspect of his being for the sake of easy labels and compact explication. Until further evidence surfaces from the archives of Tchaikovsky and his acquaintances, the speculation regarding where Tchaikovsky falls on the Kinsey scale should remain, as it were, speculation.

Zak and Gerard

Unlike Artôt, about whom we have abundant information, the young Eduard Zak appears only a few times in Tchaikovsky’s letters and diary entries. Although Tchaikovsky likely first encountered Zak just prior to composing *Romeo and Juliet*, he only first mentioned Zak in a letter dated 28 November 1871 to his elder brother, Nikolay, who worked for the railroad and had hired Zak for a labor-intensive job in the provinces. In the letter, Tchaikovsky requested that Nikolay “give [Zak] in the near future a brief vacation in Moscow” such that “he might feel refreshed in a milieu somewhat superior to that which surrounds him … lest he should grow coarse and his instinct toward intellectual refinement die out”.\(^{17}\) In May of 1873, Zak returned to Moscow, and only months later, on November 2, he committed suicide, the cause of which, according to Tchaikovsky’s St. Petersburg publisher Vasily Bessel, was “the incompatibility of [Zak’s] intellectual needs with the living conditions in which he had been placed”.\(^{18}\) Poznansky argues that this explanation is untenable, as “this youth with his intellectual needs would have had an

\(^{17}\) Poznansky, *Tchaikovsky: The Quest for the Inner Man* 120.

\(^{18}\) Ibid. 121.
inspiring and influential protector in the person of Tchaikovsky”. From what little evidence we have, neither Bessel’s theory nor Poznansky’s rebuttal are authoritative, for we cannot determine the extent of Zak’s involvement with Tchaikovsky between the early months of 1873 and Zak’s death, and thus, for all we know, Zak could have been suffering from the lingering effects of intellectual deprivation that he experienced while working at the railroads.

Many years later, in two vague diary entries dated 4 and 5 September 1887, Tchaikovsky would still lamentably recall the memory of Zak:

How amazingly clearly I remember him: the sound of his voice, his movements, but especially the extraordinarily wonderful expression on his face at times. I cannot conceive that he should be no more. His death, that is, complete nonexistence, is beyond my comprehension. It seems to me that I have never loved anyone so strongly as him. My God! No matter what they told me then and how I try to console myself, my guilt before him is terrible! And at the same time I loved him, that is, not loved, but love him still, and his memory is sacred to me!

Poznansky concludes that “it seems reasonable to suggest that it may have been Eduard Zak, and not Vladimir Gerard, as some have proposed, who served as the source of inspiration for Romeo and Juliet”. This rings at least partly true, for the only tangible citation suggesting that Tchaikovsky had romantic inclinations towards the heterosexual Gerard comes from allegedly unfounded musings in Modest’s biography of Pyotr Ilyich. In all likelihood, Tchaikovsky and Gerard were long-standing opera companions and old schoolfriends, and no more. Notwithstanding, with such a complicated love life during the years leading up to the composition of Romeo and Juliet, Tchaikovsky likely found not just one, but rather multiple sources of inspiration.

---

19 Poznansky, Tchaikovsky: The Quest for the Inner Man 121.
20 Ibid.
21 Ibid. 122.
Balakirev

The most direct musical influence on Tchaikovsky’s overture was that of Mily Alexeyevich Balakirev, to whom the overture was ultimately dedicated. The attitude that Tchaikovsky bore towards this leader of the Mighty Five could best be described as admiration verging at times on mild irritation. In August of 1869, Tchaikovsky wrote to Anatoli:

Nothing new to mention, Balakirev is leaving today. How tiring he is and yet I have to be fair, he is an honest and good man and as an artist soars above the ordinary level.22

While taking a long walk with Tchaikovsky and the critic Nikolay Kashkin, Balakirev pitched the idea of composing an orchestral piece based on Romeo and Juliet, which Tchaikovsky thus promptly began during early October. Tchaikovsky soon found himself struggling with his creative process and complained to Balakirev:

I had always expected that I should be favoured with inspiration ... I didn’t want to write to you until I had sketched at least something of the overture. But just imagine, I’m completely played out, and not one even mildly tolerable musical idea comes into my head. I’m beginning to fear that my muse has flown off to some distant place ... and perhaps I’ll have to wait a long time for her to return – and that’s why I have decided to write forewarning you that I have become ... museless23.

In response to Tchaikovsky’s plea, Balakirev, in an amusingly overzealous but well-intentioned letter, proposed to Tchaikovsky several suggestions regarding programme and form, insisting in the end that Tchaikovsky “saturate” [himself] with a plan.24 An inspired and grateful Tchaikovsky completed his first draft of the overture and had submitted it to his copyist by 29 November. At the earnest requests of Balakirev, Tchaikovsky sent him excerpts of his main themes: an E-major introductory Friar theme, denounced by Balakirev as lacking the effect of “old-world Catholicism” and instead

22 Von Meck 52.
23 Ibid.
24 Tchaikovsky 108.
imitating "the style of a quartet by Haydn, that genius of 'burgher' music which induces a fierce thirst for beer",\textsuperscript{25} the B-minor allegro Duel theme, similar but not identical to an excerpt sketched by Balakirev in an earlier letter; and the D\textsuperscript{b}-major Love theme, which Balakirev loved so much that he told Tchaikovsky how he "would like to hug [him] for it".\textsuperscript{26} Taking Balakirev's commentary to heart, Tchaikovsky eventually set out to revise the overture during July and August of the following year. Among various rescorings and other alterations, Tchaikovsky composed a completely new introduction and made significant changes to the development. Fortunately, both the original 1869 and revised 1870 manuscripts have survived to this day, although the version most often heard today is the 1880 final edition, for which the principal modifications involved the coda.\textsuperscript{27}

Conspectus of Form and Themes

Before delving into detailed hermeneutic analyses, I will provide a brief conspectus of the formal and thematic organization of the overture (2\textsuperscript{nd} ed.).\textsuperscript{28}

Tchaikovsky structured Romeo and Juliet as a sonata form with a lengthy introduction and a coda. The formal schematization below shows the overture's array of colourful themes and the liberties that Tchaikovsky took with regards to their unconventional key relations (Fig. 1):

\textsuperscript{25} Tchaikovsky 109.
\textsuperscript{26} Brown, Tchaikovsky: The Early Years (1840-1874) 183-84.
\textsuperscript{27} Brown explains that "this masterly transformation which he [Tchaikovsky] devised in 1880 had had ... necessitated the shedding of nearly twice as much existing music. The excision of most of this was no great sacrifice, but the last eight bars, where the broad Love theme had ridden majestically above a strong, darkly chromatic bass, were too good to lose. Their new habitat was brilliantly chosen; Tchaikovsky restated them in the coda between the end of the wind 'chorale' and the four concluding bars" (Brown, Tchaikovsky: The Early Years (1840-1874) 194-95).
\textsuperscript{28} For practical purposes, I will use "1\textsuperscript{st} edition" to designate the 1689 version and "2\textsuperscript{nd} edition" to designate both the 1870 and 1880 versions, which are similar enough in most respects to be discussed as one (though, of course, discrepancies between the two will be indicated where appropriate).
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Subsection/Group</th>
<th>Themes/Material</th>
<th>Keys/Tonal Centres</th>
<th>Tempo/Character</th>
<th>Measures</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Introduction</td>
<td>Subsec. 1A</td>
<td>Friar theme</td>
<td>F#m</td>
<td>Andante non tanto, quasi moderato</td>
<td>1-20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Subsec. 2A</td>
<td>Sighing theme</td>
<td>G#M – Fm</td>
<td></td>
<td>21-40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Subsec. 1B</td>
<td>Friar theme</td>
<td>Fm</td>
<td>marcatto</td>
<td>40-60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Subsec. 2B</td>
<td>Sighing theme</td>
<td>Fm – Em</td>
<td>dolce e legato</td>
<td>61-77</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Subsec. C (trans)</td>
<td>Friar theme (fragment)</td>
<td>Am – Bm</td>
<td>poco a poco string, accel.</td>
<td>78-111</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Allegro – molto meno mosso</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Exposition</td>
<td>Group 1</td>
<td>Duel theme</td>
<td>Bm</td>
<td>Allegro giusto</td>
<td>112-163</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>DM</td>
<td></td>
<td>164-184</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Bridge</td>
<td>Love theme</td>
<td>D#M</td>
<td>dolce espr. – dolce ma sensibile</td>
<td>185-242</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Development</td>
<td>Subsec. 1</td>
<td>Duel and Friar themes</td>
<td>F#m</td>
<td>marcato (^{10})</td>
<td>273-301</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Subsec. 2</td>
<td>Same as Subsec. 1</td>
<td>Gm</td>
<td></td>
<td>302-334</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Subsec. 3</td>
<td>Same as Subsec. 1</td>
<td>Bm</td>
<td></td>
<td>335-352</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Recapitulation</td>
<td>Group 1</td>
<td>Duel theme</td>
<td>Bm</td>
<td></td>
<td>353-367</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Group 2</td>
<td>Love theme</td>
<td>DM – EM</td>
<td>dolce espr. – amoroso</td>
<td>368-442</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Bridge</td>
<td>Duel and Love themes (frag.)</td>
<td>Bm – Cm – C#M – Bm</td>
<td></td>
<td>443-484</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coda</td>
<td>Subsec. 1</td>
<td>Love theme (frag.)</td>
<td>Bm</td>
<td>Moderato assai</td>
<td>485-493</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Subsec. 2</td>
<td>Love and Friar themes (frag.)</td>
<td>BM</td>
<td></td>
<td>494-522 (end)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 1: Sonata form schematization of *Romeo and Juliet*, \(^{2}\)ed.

As I will later show, Tchaikovsky’s local choices in key, along with their large-scale reductions, are not arbitrary but rather reinforce the symbolic characterizations of their respective sections. On the whole, this overture represents one of Tchaikovsky’s more cogent and organic achievements in form and programme. Yet almost twenty years later, in a letter to the Grand Duke Constantinovich, Tchaikovsky would admit to his own shortcomings in formal practices:

\(^{29}\) The bridges in this overture function as transitions but borrow most of their material from their respective preceding sections. These transitions are often sudden and rough, rarely concerning themselves with ‘proper’ harmonic modulations.

\(^{10}\) Markings of *marcato*, *p ma marcato*, and *poco marcato* appear throughout the development. Few tempo or character markings appear in the recapitulation.
I have suffered all my life from my incapacity to grasp form in general. I have fought against this innate weakness, not—I am proud to say—without good results; yet I shall go to my grave without having produced anything really perfect in form. There is frequently padding in my works; to an experienced eye the stitches show in my seams, but I cannot help it.\footnote{Tchaikovsky 569.}

Something about the surrendering tone of his words points to an unspoken truth about his compositional aesthetics. Despite his admission that he strove to attain a proficiency in form, Tchaikovsky failed not because he was incapable of formal ‘perfection’, but because he demonstrated an even more powerful resistance against it.

Famously self-critical, Tchaikovsky rarely showed any uniformity in his assessments of his own works. His appraisals of \textit{Romeo and Juliet} underwent rapid changes: on 3 March 1870, he wrote to Modest that “the work does not seem detestable … but the Lord only knows!”\footnote{Ibid. 114.} before telling Anatoli, only four days later and after the original overture’s premiere by Nikolay Rubinstein on 4 March, that he “[thinks] this is the best thing [he has] ever written”.\footnote{Von Meck 61.} If there were ever a reason for his lack of confidence, or at least consistency, in his compositions, one might find it locked within his inner struggle between formalism and lyricism. The two, while not mutually exclusive, were perhaps antithetical in Tchaikovsky’s mind. A thorough analysis of \textit{Romeo and Juliet} will show that Tchaikovsky achieves both ends within a satisfying synthesis. This, in turn, will beg the final question of whether, for Tchaikovsky (who supposedly composed the overture in a two-week burst of inspiration), an unabashed indulgence in lyricism served as a \textit{means} to formal soundness in the same way that the German formalists construed unified and organic form as a precursor of beauty.
The Friar Theme

The introduction of Romeo and Juliet (2nd ed.) exhibits the overlapping characteristics of liturgical and folk modality (Aeolian), chorale texture/scoring, plagal relations (in the form of i – iv – i – iv – i – v – iv – etc.), and parallel fifth voice-leading (Ex. 1):

Example 1: Tchaikovsky’s Romeo and Juliet, 2nd ed. – opening Friar theme (mm. 1-10)

The folk component of the Friar theme, not unlike ‘Classical’ portraits of the pastoral, underscores a refuge from the sins and strife of urban society. Likewise, the liturgical element alludes to the sanctuary of Friar Laurence, one of the only characters in Shakespeare’s play to express sympathy towards the plight of the star-crossed lovers. In the 1st edition, the Friar theme is in E-major, a key that often symbolized spirituality (particularly for 19th-century composers such as Liszt); in the 2nd edition, Tchaikovsky changes the key of the new Friar theme to F#-minor, perhaps for the purpose of withholding E-major until its fully apotheosized appearance towards the end of the work.
The Duel Theme

For the first theme of the exposition, Tchaikovsky employs various musical idioms that typify feuding and combat. In the retransitions, irregular cymbal crashes imitate the sounds of sword-fighting, while the scurrying sixteenths in the strings depict strife and, by outlining a simple B-minor harmonic scale, generate suspense by way of static harmony (Ex. 2).

Example 2: *Romeo and Juliet*, 2nd ed. – retransition in exposition (mm. 143-151)

A similar tension in many other portions of this theme suggests that the duelists, being evenly matched, must remain locked in battle. This sort of stalemate becomes instantly evident from the theme’s first four measures (Ex. 3):

Example 3: *Romeo and Juliet*, 2nd ed. – opening measures of Duel theme (mm. 112-115)

Nothing quite prepares the listener for the three consecutive measures of German-6th harmonies that resolve disjunctively to the Neapolitan in m. 115. Tchaikovsky could just
as easily have conceived m. 113 as a [iv]\(_7\), m. 114 as it stands, and the first two chords of m. 115 as [i\(_6\) – V], a credible progression that would result in a rising chromatic base line (D | E – F# | E# – F# | F – E), the kind that Rachmaninoff, or any other prevailing 19\(^{th}\) century proponent of linear chromaticism, might ostensibly have used had he been charged with the passage at hand (Ex. 4).

Example 4: Reconception of the opening measures of the Duel theme shown in Ex. 3

This, however, would have worked against the programmatic effect of the insistent German-6\(^{th}\) chords, which suspend the harmonic rhythm to signal the postponement of the breakout of the duel. I will later return to the expressive hermeneutics of this technique in greater depth, but for the moment, it is simply worth noting that the redundancies Tchaikovsky has worked into the programme also appear in the short dialogic exchanges between instrumental groups comprised of the strings and the upper winds, representing (if not identifying) the two families taunting one another (Ex. 55).

Example 5: Romeo and Juliet, 2\(^{nd}\) ed. – sparring exchanges between winds and strings representative of the stalemate in the Montague-Capulet feud (mm. 122-124)
The Love Theme

Since the advent of animated cartoons and televised commercials in the mid-20th century, the Love theme in Romeo and Juliet has joined the ranks of Dvořák’s Humoresque and Rimsky-Korsakov’s Flight of the Bumblebee in popular media fame. In addition to its usage in Wayne’s World (1992), Seeing Double (2003), and Ren & Stimpy (1991-96), the theme has appeared in the best-selling computer game in history, “The Sims”, designed by Will Wright and published by Maxis in the year 2000.34 Without dwelling too long on the diegesis of Tchaikovsky’s music in this game, it is astounding to imagine that, by way of “The Sims” alone, the Love theme from Romeo and Juliet has reached the ears of over 6.3 million gamers over the past six years. The theme has become one of the most prominent melodic paradigms of romantic love in the same way that Chopin’s Marche Funèbre has become for a musical cliché for death and funereality.

Many musicologists have seen the opening melody of the Love theme as “Romeo’s” (Ex. 6) and the subsequent one as “Juliet’s” (Ex. 7), though many have also rejected this assertion on the grounds of the absence of explicit intentionality.35 I would contend that sufficient evidence does exist to justify the individualization of these sub-themes: first, that Tchaikovsky, in a letter to Balakirev, deliberately sketched these two themes as independent portions of the Love theme, hence contradicting the otherwise plausible argument that he devised the second ostinato-like melody – “Juliet’s” – as

34 In this “life simulation” game, players control the lives of virtual people (called “Sims”) in a suburban household, choosing their careers, designating their activities, and shaping their relationships with other Sims. Upon reaching a ‘critical’ point in a relationship with one another, two Sims officially ‘fall in love’ to the Love theme of Romeo and Juliet with little red hearts popping up in thought bubbles above their heads.

simply transitional and un-essential in nature; second, that the instrumentation of the first statement of “Romeo’s” theme (viola and English horn) is more masculine, though not by much, than that of Juliet’s (violins); and finally, that in Shakespeare’s play, Romeo initially assumes the role of aggressor (such as in the balcony scene of II.2: “But soft! What light through yonder window breaks?”) and Juliet the reciprocator (same scene: “Ay me!” – a declamation that appropriately matches her theme’s sighing gestures).

Example 6: Romeo and Juliet, 2nd ed. – “Romeo’s theme” (mm. 185-192)

Example 7: Romeo and Juliet, 2nd ed. – “Juliet’s theme” (mm. 193-198)

Thematic Fusion in the Development

The development presents a series of high-energy p passages that merge the Friar theme with the Duel theme. In Shakespeare’s play, Friar Laurence only participates in private scenes; the programme of Tchaikovsky’s development, however, depicts Friar Laurence
bursting into the bourgeois city streets to pacify the feuding parties, whose simmering hostility manifests in the vigorous, albeit \( p \) and suppressed, running sixteenths (Ex. 8).

Example 8: *Romeo and Juliet*, 2\textsuperscript{nd} ed. – fusion of Friar and Duel themes (mm. 280-284)

These instances of thematic fusion pull the Friar theme out of its original sanctuary – the Aeolian mode, with its pastoral and liturgical remoteness – and forces it to become tonal, rhythmicized, and eventually, in m. 335, a jarring *forte* iteration in the trumpets. The final statement of the Friar’s melody in the development actually appears neither modal nor purely tonal, as Tchaikovsky builds it upon a whole-tone tetrachord and drives it upward to a wrenching G\# (Ex. 9). Regarding this distortion, Henry Zajaczkowski offers some compelling insight in *Tchaikovsky’s Musical Style*:

The final debacle occurs with the hideous distortion wrought upon the Friar Laurence theme. This horrifyingly inspired transformation could hardly be bettered as a way of representing intolerable strain. As the orchestra does its best to drown out the theme, which appears on the trumpets, by pitting against its raucous assertions of first-subject-derived rhythm, the theme fights back by stretching to reach even higher, more emphatic pitches at its second statement. In the process, it puts itself out of joint, so to speak: its mutilated repeat starts on the same pitch (B) as the original statement, but in straining to attain higher pitches, it deforms several of its previously robust implied intervals, perfect fourths, into painful augmented fourths. This clearly portends the defeat of the Friar Laurence theme, and indeed, after a two-measure link in which it is even further contorted, this time rhythmically, by means of syncopation, it is then swept completely aside by the furious scales of the feud music, and tutti representations of clashing swords, marking the start of the recapitulation.\(^{36}\)

Example 9: *Romeo and Juliet*, 2nd ed. – distortion of Friar theme (mm. 335-42)

Recapitulation and Coda

After depicting the eruption of the families’ duel in previous sections, Tchaikovsky opens the recapitulation with an abridged statement of the Duel theme. In the second theme, Tchaikovsky reverses Romeo’s and Juliet’s respective sub-themes in the second group, with the lyricism and harmonic thrust of Romeo’s theme justifying its positioning as the consequent phrase through which it can expand with relative freedom (Ex. 10).\(^{37}\) (I will discuss later the symbolic and textual basis for this reversal and its anti- or counterheteronormative hermeneutics.)

\(^{37}\) The reversal of two sub-motifs *within* a group/theme in the recapitulation is a rare phenomenon, not entirely akin to most examples of James Hepokoski’s “sonata deformations” that address the reversal of first and second groups/themes proper. Nonetheless, it is relevant to consider Hepokoski and Warren Darcy’s assessment of deformation as a means of “overriding [a] norm altogether in order to produce a calculated expressive effect. It is precisely the strain, the distortion of the norm (elegantly? beautifully? wittily? cleverly?? stormily? despairingly? shockingly?) for which the composer strives at the deformational moment”. James Hepokoski and Warren Darcy, *Elements of Sonata Theory: Norms, Types, and Deformations in the Late-Eighteenth-Century Sonata* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006).
Example 10: *Romeo and Juliet*, 2nd ed. – reversal of Romeo’s and Juliet’s sub-themes (mm. 379-92)

Following two consecutive statements of Romeo’s theme in D-major, an interlude, sounding rather like a coda due to its liberal use of first- and second-inversion chords, delays the entrance of Romeo’s most rapturous declaration set in the spiritual key of E-major. Comparing the key scheme reductions of the introductory Friar theme with the various statements of the Love theme throughout the overture, we see that latter
moves upwards through $D^b - D - E$ in a desperate attempt to reach the sanctuary of E-major shared by the Friar’s descending $F#\slash G^b - F - E$ (Fig. 2).

Figure 2: *Romeo and Juliet, 2\textsuperscript{nd} ed.* – comparing reductions of tonal progressions of Friar and Love themes

Romeo’s proclamation in E-major, before long, is mercilessly attacked by the Duel theme, which in turn is interrupted by a noble re-entrance of the Friar theme in the lower winds and brass. This stretto effect signals the overture’s secondary climax (the first being the Love theme in the recapitulation), in which all three principal themes come together at a fateful juncture that results in a series of tumbling hemiola representing, rather onomatopoeically, Romeo’s death (Ex. 11).

Example 11: *Romeo and Juliet, 2\textsuperscript{nd} ed.* – transition from development to coda (mm. 479-484)
The overture’s coda begins with a funeral march throbbing in the timpani and double basses, above which we hear a distortion of Romeo’s melody (perhaps Juliet’s lamenting moans), now full of agonizing tritones and diminished fourths (Ex. 12).

Example 12: *Romeo and Juliet*, 2nd ed. (mm. 485-488)

In the wake of so many calamitous fusions of the Duel theme with the Friar and Love themes, this section finally merges the chorale texture of the Friar theme with Juliet’s sighing motif from the Love theme, a long-awaited union that transforms the funereal pathos into an unmistakable apotheosis. The harp strums delineate the heavenly transcendence of the lovers above the mortal plane and their triumph as martyrs of love. James Hepokoski furthermore sees the harp as “characteristically [calling] up images of a bard [Shakespeare?] singing the age-old tale”, with the Friar fulfilling a role similar to that of the Chorus in Shakespeare’s Prologue.\(^{38}\) The ff B-major chords that close the overture echo the irregular rhythms of the cymbal crashes in the Duel theme – rhythms no longer characterizing clashing swords but the violent confusion of the surviving Montagues and Capulets gathered around the deceased lovers.\(^{39}\)

\(^{38}\) Hepokoski, *Elements of Sonata Theory* 304.

\(^{39}\) After hearing an early performance of the overture in 1871, Balakirev asked Tchaikovsky: “The actual ending is not bad, but why those accentuated chords in the very last bars? This seems to contradict the meaning of the play, and is inartistic. Nadejda Nicholaevna [Madame Rimsky-Korsakov] has scratched out these chords with her own fair hands, and wants to make the pianoforte arrangement end pianissimo.” Some sources claim that Tchaikovsky omitted these final chords in his final arrangements of *Romeo and Juliet* for piano, while others have assumed, according to our surviving orchestral autographs of the 1870 and 1880 editions, that no such changes were made. As I have not myself encountered evidence of the former, I am inclined to believe that, if Tchaikovsky had indeed taken Balakirev’s advice, he did not do so whole-heartedly and may have done so for the sake of a private concert or to appease particular individuals who shared Balakirev’s distaste (Tchaikovsky 111).
Hermeneutics of Autobiography and Programme

Love, Eros, and Nega

For Tchaikovsky, the overture’s Love theme proved to be a groundbreaking feat in its sublime representation of love and eros. These new creative heights must have been in part inspired by his multiple and often overlapping romantic affairs, among which the one with Zak, as Tchaikovsky’s future diary entries suggest, emerged as the most intense. Throughout his career, Tchaikovsky would habitually struggle with the problem of reconciling the roles of inspiration and calculation in his composition process. Leon Botstein explains that Tchaikovsky “[identified] the conflict between outside interruptions as well as the ‘cold, rational, technical process’ of composition and the organic consequences of inspiration”, how he “[talked] about a program only after first discussing the challenge of mediating inspiration based on internal states of mind with the star, compromising necessity of formal compositional demands”.\(^{40}\) As a way of guarding himself against the dangers of Brahmsian formalism, which he criticized for its “pretension to profundity”, Tchaikovsky often turned to sheer inspiration, the results of which he believed would most convincingly approximate a ‘natural’ aesthetic – that is, the beautiful melodiousness exemplified by Mozart’s and Schubert’s musical legacies.\(^{41}\)


\(^{41}\) In a long letter to the Grand Duke Constantin Constantinovich, dated 2 October 1888, Tchaikovsky writes: “As regards Brahms, I cannot at all agree with your Highness. In the music of this master (it is impossible to deny his mastery) there is something dry and cold which repulse me. He has very little melodic invention. He never speaks out his musical ideas to the end. Scarcely do we hear an enjoyable melody, than it is engulfed in a whirlpool of unimportant harmonic progressions and modulations, as though the special aim of the composer was to be unintelligible. He excites and irritates our musical senses without wishing to satisfy them, and seems ashamed to speak the language which goes straight to the heart. His depth is not real: c’est voulu. ... All he does is serious and noble, but he lacks the chief thing – beauty (Tchaikovsky 569-70).
In many ways, the power of the Love theme can be understood as a testament both to Tchaikovsky’s consuming and long-lived love for Zak as well as, in a broader sense, Tchaikovsky’s excitement about engaging in some of the first serious romances of his life. What musical ingredients, then, has made this theme so successful, prompting Balakirev to praise it endlessly with sensual images and enabling its immortalization as one of today’s most popular love melodies?

First, a harmonic tension underlies the beautiful symmetry that frames the opening eight measures of the theme. The absence of root-position chords and a gorgeously extended circle of fifths in the progression – \([I^6_4 \mid V^4_2 \mid I^6 \mid Vb^9_7 \text{ of } V^7 \text{ of } Vb^9_7 \text{ of } ii^7 \mid V^7 \mid I]\) – momentarily suspend the theme in blissful oblivion. Beyond these symmetries and tensions, the theme’s flat-third key relation to the tonic, rather unusual in sonata form, evokes D-flat major, a key that often symbolized in 19th-century programmes the topics of *amoroso* and *eros*. In his article, “Masculine, Feminine”, Hepokoski proposes that “one might also suggest a reading of the second theme’s slippage into the ‘wrong-key’ erotic as an abandonment of the expected or societally ‘normal’ (both within the terms of the suggested program and within the norms of minor-mode sonatas) in pursuit of forbidden, but irresistible pleasure, a transgressively sensual encounter with the physical, the bodily”.

Tchaikovsky further invokes sexual overtones in the Love theme by combining Juliet’s rising and falling gestures with Romeo’s second statement, in which the French horns take over Juliet’s motif from the strings and proceeds to accompany, rather

---

42 Balakirev wrote to Tchaikovsky: “When I play [the Love theme] then I imagine you are lying naked in your bath and that … Artó-Padilla herself is washing your tummy with hot lather from scented soap” (Brown, *Tchaikovsky: The Early Years (1840–1874)* 184).

43 James Hepokoski, “Masculine, Feminine…” 499.
lustfully, Romeo’s soaring melody. The concept of Romeo and Juliet as thoroughly intertwined lovers comes through at various points in Shakespeare’s play, such as their first encounter, during which they banter back and forth, finishing each other’s thoughts and creating, perhaps unwittingly, an endearing dialogic sonnet (I.5.94-107). Ominous portents, however, appropriately loom over the sonnet, hence recalling the foreboding sonnet recited by the Chorus in the Prologue.

Perhaps the most intriguing element of the Love theme lies in how Tchaikovsky introduces a kind of exoticism that grips the theme and never quite lets go. Tchaikovsky transitions into the theme via a German-6th modulation, already foreshadowed by the common-tone modulations in the introduction and the augmented-6th harmonies in the Duel theme. He bestowed an incredible weight upon this simple chord because he followed up with ample invocations of sexy “sixthiness” throughout the Love theme.44 Taruskin defines this as characteristic of nega, an “attribute of the orient as imagined by the Russians”, particularly the chromatic passings (both melodic and harmonic) between the fifth and sixth scale degrees.45 Later appearances of this $V^7$/German-6th sonority acquire a symbolic significance all to its own, for it alone calls for the rejuvenation of the Love theme like Romantic nightingales that oft herald the coming of dawn.46

---


45 Taruskin, Defining Russia Musically 165.

46 Edward Garden believes Tchaikovsky’s appeals to exoticism to have been rooted at least partly in Balakirev’s influence: “Another Balakirevian trait is evident in Tchaikovsky’s [love] theme: the use of the sharpened dominant over a tonic pedal. This harmonic trait was not new; it had been used by Glinka in the 5/4 Bridal Chorus from A Life for the Tsar and by Schumann in his Manfred overture, to name only two examples. But Balakirev’s extreme fondness for it was not lost on any of his protégés – they all used it quite frequently at this time. A very good contemporary example from Balakirev’s own music is his harmonicization of the Tartar folk-melody in the slow middle section of his Oriental Fantasy Islamey. It was in Tchaikovsky’s rooms that Balakirev had heard an Armenian actor sing this melody, and what is more, as he composed Islamey, he played it through on the piano with Tchaikovsky, to whom the bass part was
In the analysis below, I synthesize the dual parallel descending lines in Romeo’s motif to expose a quasi-octatonic scale, best described as symmetrical halves of an octatonic series converging at a midpoint marked by two consecutive half-steps (Ex. 13).

Example 13: *Romeo and Juliet*, 2nd ed. – octatonic scale reduction in “Romeo’s theme” (mm. 185-192)

As noted by Taruskin in *Defining Russia Musically* and Steven Baur in “Ravel’s ‘Russian’ Period”, octatonicism in 19th-century and early 20th-century music has often resonated with appeals to exoticism. In his article, “Passing – and Failing – in Late Nineteenth-Century Russia”, Raymond Knapp acknowledges “a gradually emergent octatonic element in the violin climax just before [the various instances of ‘passing’ in this movement relates] to Tchaikovsky’s own ‘passing’ dilemma, both as a homosexual and as a Russian nationalist working within German forms”.47 Since octatonicism metonymyzes a set of broader dissonances that transcend, in Knapp’s words, “normal

---

47 Raymond Knapp, “Passing – and Failing – in the Late-Nineteenth-Century Russia; or Why We Should Care about the Cuts in Tchaikovsky’s Violin Concerto”, 19th-Century Music (XXVI/3, 2003) 234.
causality”, its deployment in the Love theme (however embedded) fittingly casts the young lovers as transgressors against society’s ‘norms’, which, in this case, are characterized by the longstanding hostility between the warring families.

Through the reductions and analysis shown below, Taruskin identifies other aspects of nega in the exchanges between Romeo and Juliet’s respective themes (Ex. 14):

The themes evoke nega just as surely by means of the strongly marked chromatic pass between the fifth and sixth degrees, and the first Love theme (the one generally associated with Romeo) features, on its first appearance, the equally marked English horn timbre. Juliet responds to Romeo’s advance by mirroring his descending chromatic pass with an ascending one that is then maintained as an oscillation (or better, perhaps, an oscillation), while Romeo’s ecstatic reentry is prepared by reversing the pass and linking up with the striking augmented-sixth progression that had launched Chaikovsky’s “balcony scene” to begin with.¹⁸

---

¹⁸ Taruskin, *Defining Russia Musically* 183.

Example 14: Nega elements in Love theme (from Taruskin’s *Defining Russia Musically* 184)
Taruskin goes on to stress how Balakirev, in one of his letters, “confirms the surmise that Chaikovsky used the orientalist trope metonymically, to conjure up not the East as such but rather its exotic sex appeal”, as Romeo and Juliet are indeed lovers not of the East, but of Europe.\textsuperscript{49} And although this trope does make for some obviously seductive melodies and exquisitely chromatic progressions, we cannot overlook, nonetheless, the self-criticism that Tchaikovsky expressed in regards to the exotic elements of his style, about which he writes in a letter to Nadezhda von Meck:

\begin{quote}
In the first place I am a Russian – there is something exotic in my music which makes it inaccessible to foreigners. My overture to \textit{Romeo and Juliet} has been played in every capital, but always without success. In Vienna and Paris it was hissed. A short time ago it met with no better reception in Dresden. In some other towns (London and Hamburg) it was more fortunate, but, all the same, my music has not been included in the standard repertory of Germany and other countries. Among musical circles abroad my name is not unknown. A few men have been [especially] interested in me, and taken some pains to include my works in their concert programmes; but I have generally met with insurmountable obstacles.\textsuperscript{50}
\end{quote}

In his 1881 article in Fétis’ \textit{Biographie universelle}, the French critic Arthur Pougin interjects among otherwise amicable and laudatory observations a critique of Tchaikovsky’s exotic style as disorienting and “unintelligible”:

\begin{quote}
His rather hazy eclecticism has doubtless prevented him up to now from showing the full measure of his worth. It is because of this that his originality has not yet blazed forth upon us strongly, and that his works, very inconsistent in character and inspiration, draw attention to themselves sometimes for their truly exquisite qualities, sometimes for [exhibiting] a kind of willful unintelligibility, a style stretched beyond its limits, a contrived tiresome extravagance which makes comprehension difficult and which totally wearies the ears (as in his symphonic fantasia on Shakespeare’s \textit{The Tempest} and in his overture \textit{Romeo and Juliet}).\textsuperscript{51}
\end{quote}

There appears an ironic likeness between Pougin’s denouncement of \textit{nega} in Tchaikovsky’s music as “contrived extravagance … which totally wearies the ears” and Tchaikovsky’s own disapproval of Brahms’ manners of organicist excess as the

\textsuperscript{49} Ibid. 185.
\textsuperscript{50} Tchaikovsky 289.
\textsuperscript{51} Cited in David Brown, \textit{Tchaikovsky Remembered} (London, Faber and Faber Ltd., 1993) 173.
“pretension to profundity”. The analogous criticisms are not necessarily hypocritical, to be sure, but they certainly attest to these composers’ opposing aesthetics and the fact that formalist ‘profundity’ and lyricist ‘extravagance’ could provoke similar critiques from intensely contrasting musicians.

Gender and Counter-Heteronormative Source Studies

I now wish to contemplate what might have attracted Tchaikovsky to Romeo and Juliet in the first place, for even though Balakirev did directly encourage him to take up this project, there must have been some additional appeal in Shakespeare’s play that inspired Tchaikovsky to invest such unprecedented personal effort and spirit into the work.

52 Romeo and Juliet still appeared to have had little success even by December of 1876, prior to which we have records of two recent failures: first, regarding Hans Richter’s Vienna performance, at which “a few hisses were heard” and for which Hanslick wrote a scathing review in the Neue Freie Presse; second, regarding Pasdeloup’s Paris performance, which, according to the details disclosed by [Sergei] Taneiev to Tchaikovsky in a letter, failed as a result of Pasdeloup’s tactless handling of the work:

“I have just come from Pasdeloup’s concert, where your Romeo overture was shamefully bungled. The tempi were all too fast, so that one could scarcely distinguish the three notes one from the other.

The second subject was played by the wind as if they had only to support the harmony, and did not realize they had the subject. The following was especially bad:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{not a single crescendo, not a single diminuendo. At the repetition of the accessory theme in D major} \\
\end{align*}
\]

the bassoons played their fifth in the bass so energetically that they drowned the other parts. There were no absolutely false notes, but the piece produced a poor effect. Pasdeloup obviously understood nothing about it, and does not know how such a piece should be played. No wonder the Overture did not please the public and was but coolly received. It was as painful to me as if I had been taking part in the concert myself. Pasdeloup alone, however, was to blame, not the public. The Overture is by no means incomprehensible; it only needs to be well interpreted” (Tchaikovsky 191-92).
From primary sources alone, it is difficult to ascertain whether Tchaikovsky had read first-hand a translation of Shakespeare’s play prior to his composition of the overture in 1869. We know for a fact that he had indeed read the play before he put his finishing touches on the overture in 1880, for he wrote to Modest in May of 1878:

Since I have read *Romeo and Juliet*, all these Undines, Berthaldas and Hugos seem silly and childish. Enough of them, I am going to compose my very best work. It seems queer to me now that I did not realize long ago that I was chosen to write the music to this drama. I cannot imagine anything more appropriate to my musical talent. No kings, no marches, nothing that belongs to a Grand Opera. But there is love, love, and love! And what a delight are these secondary parts: Lorenzo, Tybalt, Mercutio. Please do not fear monotony; the first love will be completely different to the second. In the first one everything will be bright and clear: love! Love not frightened or stopped by anything! In the second – tragedy. From being children full of love *Romeo and Juliet* have become people, loving and suffering, caught up by tragic, hopeless circumstances.\(^{53}\)

In his letter, Tchaikovsky makes no reference to love within any gendered definitions, narrating simply that “Romeo and Juliet have become people, loving and suffering”. Indeed, something about the absence, even defiance of heteronormative ideals in this play must have rang true with Tchaikovsky’s perception of his own dilemma.

The reversal of Romeo’s and Juliet’s sub-motifs in the recapitulation might mirror something of Tchaikovsky’s own personal defiance of such norms. Throughout Shakespeare’s play, the characters of Romeo and Juliet undergo a reversal in their conventional gender roles, with Romeo gradually becoming more feminine and Juliet more masculine. Shakespeare makes this evident early on during the first encounter between the lovers at the Capulet mansion: following their joint sonnet, Romeo exclaims, “Thus from my lips, by thine my sin is purged” (I.5.108), taking the initiative to kiss Juliet; immediately thereafter, however, Juliet assumes the role of the aggressor by telling Romeo, “Then have my lips the sin that they have took” and leading him to kiss her again to retrieve his “sin” from her lips (I.5.109). Later on, amidst the climactic duel at the

\(^{53}\) Von Meck 165.
beginning of the third act, Romeo apostrophizes to Juliet on the effeminizing power of love: “O sweet Juliet,/ Thy beauty hath made me effeminate/ And in my temper softened valor’s steel!” (III.1.112-114). Moreover, in Act III, Scene 3, after attempting to kill himself with a dagger, Romeo is thus chastised by Friar Laurence: “Art thou a man? Thy form cries out thou art;/ Thy tears are womanish, thy wild acts denote/ The unreasonable fury of a beast./ Unseemly woman in a seeming man!/ And ill-beseeming beast in seeming both!” (III.3.109-113). Unlike so many of the bard’s other lovelorn heroes, such as Marc Antony and Othello, Romeo fails to commit suicide by the blade. Such a privilege, so to speak, belongs to Juliet, who stabs herself with a dagger after Romeo dies from consuming poison, a fate generally reserved for Shakespearean heroines such as Cleopatra and Gertrude.\(^{54}\)

Deformations in tonal structures have a worthy analogue – and perhaps predecessor – in the metrical deformations of poetry and verse. To underscore a particular line and draw attention to its discreet connotations, Shakespeare often devised its metrical rhythm to be distinct from that of adjoining lines. For example, following the first volta in the famous opening soliloquy of Richard III, most lines are set to iambic pentameter, with lines 16 and 18 commencing with an emphatic spondee (Fig. 4).

\[
\begin{array}{ccccccc}
U & / & U & / & U & / & U \\
\text{But I, that am not shaped for sportive tricks,} \\
U & / & U & / & U & / & U
\end{array}
\]

\(^{54}\) In his article, “The Tragic Reversed Recapitulation in the German Classical Tradition”, Timothy L. Jackson, exploring the instances of reversed recapitulations in Mozart's Idomeneo, Cherubini's Médée, and Brahms' Schicksalslied and Tragic Overture, explains the following: “In a small but highly significant repertoire of late eighteenth, nineteenth, and early twentieth century sonatas, the reversed recapitulation may be interpreted as a tragic-programmatic deformation of 'textbook' standard sonata form”. Even though, like Hepokoski's sonata deformations, Jackson approaches these concepts as holistic group/theme reversals, some of his analyses of these reversals' programmatic significance are applicable to the sub-motif reversals in Romeo and Juliet. For more details, refer to this article in the Journal of Music Theory (Vol. 40, No. 1, Spring 1996) 86-100.
Nor made to court an amorous looking glass;
I, that am rudely stamped and want love's majesty
To strut before a wanton ambling nymph;
I, that am curtailed of this fair proportion.
Cheated of feature by dissembling nature,
Deformed, unfinished, sent before my time
Into this breathing world, scarce half made up .... (I.i.14-21)

Fig. 4: Shakespeare’s Richard III (I.i.14-21)

The blatant metrical deformation of line 19 – “Cheated of feature by dissembling nature” (two dactyls followed by three iambs, the final one catalectic) – merges form and meaning on various levels: first, Richard’s misshapen figure and bastard heritage reflect the line’s metrical irregularity; second, that Richard has been “cheated” of a beautiful, or at least presentable, appearance justifies the catalectic iamb likewise robbed of its stressed syllable; and finally, “dissembling nature” alludes not only to Richard’s villainous deceptions but also carries a secondary definition – the perversion or separation of “assembly” – that illuminates the perverse, unnatural fusion of dactyls and iambs. The subtext of formal deformation, either in Shakespeare or in Tchaikovsky, opens to us a hermeneutic avenue that pits the aberrant individual against environing social and moral norms. How far we choose to follow this path greatly depends, needless to say, on autobiographical evidence and our own analytical discretion.

Whether Tchaikovsky understood the thematic implications of Shakespeare’s play surely affects the validity of these hermeneutic claims. On this point, however, I firmly
believe that poetic intentionality, especially in programme music, should not maintain a monopoly over esthetic appreciation, for even if Tchaikovsky had not contemplated Shakespeare’s play, can we not still value the fascinating literary parallels of the theme reversal? Unless it is the express design of historians to prescribe uniform readings of musical programmes – as so often seems the case in contemporary program notes that purport to instruct the audience on “how to listen” to a particular piece – there is no reason why we should not embrace in Tchaikovsky’s overture plural epistemologies and hermeneutics, any and all of which may enrich the listeners’ experience and the performers’ motivations.\textsuperscript{55}

\textit{Suppressive-Propulsive Motions and the Hermeneutics of (Musical) Repression}

At various points in his music, particularly in transitions, Tchaikovsky employs extensive small- and large-scale repetition. Zajaczkowski elucidates and praises the nature of Tchaikovsky’s transitions, identifying their technique as “suppressive-propulsive”:

\begin{quote}
The [suppressive-propulsive] technique operates at all levels .... Its most small-scale application has been demonstrated here in, for example, the preacing of a modulation by static harmony (the excessive repetition of a chord) which is “suppressive” because it delays the advent of the change of key, which thereby becomes “propulsive”.\textsuperscript{56}
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{55} Other problems of source study arise concerning how Tchaikovsky might have modeled mm. 11-20 of the Friar theme (2\textsuperscript{nd} Ed.) on the half-step motifs in the opening of Liszt’s \textit{Der nächtliche Zug}. After reviewing the Friar theme from Tchaikovsky’s 1\textsuperscript{st} edition, Balakirev proposed that Tchaikovsky revise it along the style of “Liszt’s chorales (\textit{Der nächtliche Zug} in F sharp, \textit{Hunnenschlacht} and ‘St Elizabeth’) with an ancient Catholic character, resembling that of Orthodox [church music]” (Brown 183-84). Whether or not Tchaikovsky took this to heart is questionable, but given the popularity of \textit{Der nächtliche Zug} among Russian circles, Tchaikovsky was likely familiar with this piece.

Another uncertain source is the Overture-Prologue of Gounod’s opera, \textit{Romeo and Juliet}, which received a winning premiere at the Théâtre Lyrique of Paris on 27 April 1867. Two musical elements of Tchaikovsky’s Duel theme – the use of imitation as representative of dueling (e.g. mm. 126-134) and the sparring figurations (e.g. mm. 135-142) – resemble similar elements found in Gounod’s Prologue (e.g. mm. 15-18 and 33-44 respectively). Though the opera enjoyed tremendous success in France, we cannot confirm whether Tchaikovsky had heard it prior to composing his overture. Only years later, in August of 1878, would Tchaikovsky, wishing to write his own opera based on \textit{Romeo and Juliet}, comment to Nadezhda von Meck: “I am still captivated by \textit{Romeo and Juliet}, but ... first it is very difficult, and secondly, I am rather frightened of Gounod, who has already written a mediocre opera on this subject” (Tchaikovsky 316).

\textsuperscript{56} Zajaczkowski 45.
Though Zajaczkowski primarily refers to this technique in relation to the *Pathétique*, Tchaikovsky uses it even more persuasively in *Romeo and Juliet*, as I show below in two examples: the transition from the introduction to the exposition in the 2nd edition (Ex. 15) and the analogous section in the 1st edition (Ex. 16).

Regarding the former, the repeated B-minor chords could be deemed simplistic, but they aptly accomplish the task of building suspense and propelling this section into the succeeding *Allegro giusto*.

---

Example 15: *Romeo and Juliet*, 2nd ed. – suppressive-propulsive transition between introduction and exposition (mm. 101-112)

---

57 In *The Classical Style*, Charles Rosen points to a technique of “suspended” motion that we might consider as the inverse of Zajaczkowski’s concept of suppressive-propulsive motion. Rosen tells us that the “cherished circle of fifths ... gives the impression of treading water. It is unhappily used by Philipp Emanuel Bach in many expository passages for an *illusion of motion*. In the great classical works, however, it is mostly used precisely for this quality of suspended motion: in a number of Beethoven developments (as in the first movement of the *Waldstein* Sonata), when a point of extreme tension is reached, a sequence, often of considerable length, holds the music poised, immovable, in spite of a violence of dynamic accent” (Rosen 49). It is worth noting, then, that the extended circle of fifths progression of the overture’s Love theme possesses a kind of “suppressive-propulsive” quality and that my following hermeneutic analysis of this technique applies indirectly to this theme as well. Charles Rosen, *The Classical Style* (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 1997) 49.
Incidentally, for the transition in the 1st edition, Tchaikovsky uses entirely different material (a motivic fragment foreshadowing the Love theme to come) but in a similar suppressive-propulsive manner – in this case, a cycling repeated figuration fading to *pp*:

Example 16: *Romeo and Juliet*, 1st ed. – similar suppressive-propulsive technique with Love theme material (mm. 66-87)
In the epilogue of Tchaikovsky's Musical Style, Zajaczkowski hints at, but does not choose to follow up on, the possibility that Tchaikovsky's "suppressive-propulsive" technique had biographical import:

It would help us, in general terms, to see the roots of his "suppressive-propulsive" style in his personal character. In other words, one cannot help wondering if the suppression of emotions, of varying types, followed by their sudden release, was a notable acceptance of their faults, could give way to intense bitterness once he had been genuinely hurt by them – as in the case of Nikolay Rubinstein in [regards to] the First Piano Concerto, or Mme. Von Meck’s apparent rejection of him.^[38]

^[38] Zajaczkowski 138.
I would like to propose, along more specific lines, that the “suppressive-propulsive” style represents some latent manifestation of Tchaikovsky’s homosexuality. Though it is feasible to relate “suppression” to some deep-set Freudian repression and “propulsion” to the express symptoms of such repression, I recognize that confirming this proves a far more difficult task than my two previous analyses of biographical hermeneutics. Much of the homophobic criticism of Tchaikovsky since the 19th-century has somewhat subsided: no longer would we really search for a single “gay note” or “gay key”, but contemporary historians are still seeking more comprehensive and decidedly contextual correlations between the sexuality of a composer and his or her musical choices.

Such are the aims of Knapp’s article, “Passing – and Failing – in Late Nineteenth-Century Russia”, which reckons how certain cuts made by Tchaikovsky in his Violin Concerto could serve as a metaphor for (or even an explicit indicator of) society’s oppression of homosexuality. Regarding the structural and representational relations between the solo and tutti “faux [common-time] polonaise” sections, Knapp proposes:

Two readings of roughly equal plausibility readily present themselves. If we understand the orchestra and soloist to be maintaining separate identities throughout this passage, then the resulting scenario, in which the imperial pose falters and is then rescued through instructive example, might indeed entail some degree of mockery on the part of the soloist. The latter, in openly flaunting its ‘tendencies,’ makes an implicit claim of exemption from retributive consequences, which the polonaise seems to acknowledge when it returns .... But the framing polonaise sections suggest another reading, in which the violin solo represents the ‘interior’ dimension of an outer pomp. Within this reading, we glimpse in that interior what might well be described as a homosexual closet created and maintained under the cover of imperial majesty. ... In whichever reading we choose to follow, Tchaikovsky has intertwined ‘gayness’ and imperial pomp within a symbiotic partnership, so that either maintains itself only through the other. In so doing, in opening the closet between the two statements of the faux-polonaise, he has in effect ‘outed’ the aristocracy, an act of empowerment that serves to launch the ensuing cadenza.\(^{59}\)

Knapp justifies the autobiographical reading by revealing that Tchaikovsky “learned from the example of [Prince] Vladimir Meshchersky (1839-1914), a known homosexual who,
although he had enemies aplenty, nevertheless managed to secure a position of influence within the upper echelons of Russian aristocracy". For Tchaikovsky, sexual tensions and stakes were high during the years leading up to 1878, altogether marking one of the darkest periods of his life. In January of 1875, he lamented in a letter to Anatoli:

I am very, very lonely here, and if it were not for working constantly I should simply give myself over to melancholy. It is also true that my damned homosexuality creates an unbridgeable chasm between me and most people. It imparts to my character an estrangement, a fear of people, immoderate timidity, mistrustfulness, in short a thousand qualities whereby I am growing more and more unsociable.

By September of 1876, Tchaikovsky had spiraled into an even deeper depression, confessing to Modest the motives behind his impending and infamously catastrophic marriage to Antonina Milyukova:

Do you really think that I am oppressed by this awareness that they pity and forgive me, when in fact I am guilty of nothing! And is it really not dreadful to think that people who love me can ever be ashamed of me! But, you see, this has happened a hundred times before and will happen a hundred times again. In a word, I should like by my marriage, or in general an open affair with a woman, to shut the mouth of various contemptible creatures whose opinion I do not value in the least but who can cause pain to the people close to me. In any event, do not be frightened for me, dear Modia. The realization of my plans is not at all as close as you think. I am so set in my habits and tastes that it is not possible to cast them aside at once, like an old glove.

Despite the fact that, in the late 1860s, Tchaikovsky had not expressed suffering of this magnitude or nature, it is certainly plausible that, if he were later willing to marry Milyukova in 1877 to salvage his public reputation and sublimate his homosexual guilt, he might have pursued Artôt years earlier with similar intentions (whether consciously or inadvertently). Consequently, the hermeneutics of the "suppressive-propulsive" technique in the Violin Concerto can be likened, at least in part, to that in Romeo and Juliet.

---

60 Knapp goes on to say: "If we may imagine that the worlds Tchaikovsky projects in his music were not simply autobiographical but also vehicles through which beliefs could be reinforced and fantasies given a convincing outer reality, then his boldness in forming a renewed, closer relationship with Meshchersky after 1880 was surely fueled in part by the experience of writing the Violin Concerto" (Knapp 221).


62 Ibid. 65.
Ultimately, the biographical hermeneutics of the "propulsive-suppressive" technique need not impose an irrevocably grim reading upon *Romeo and Juliet*. Looking forward almost twenty-five years, we see this overture's conclusion recalled in the finale of the *Pathétique*, which closes with a funereal contrabassoon ostinato punctuated by the sound of sagging processional footsteps fading into the distance (Ex. 17).

Example 17: Finale of Tchaikovsky's Symphony No. 6 – funereal coda, *Andante giusto* (mm. 147-171)
Example 17 (cont'd)
It is no doubt tantalizing for us to indulge in the dreamy image of Tchaikovsky, weeks before his impending death, recollecting with a thick nostalgia his overture and the earlier loves of his life, ostensibly matching his debut masterpiece with his final legacy, coupling his first great love (Zak) with his last (Davydov). And it is no doubt Romantic sensibilities that would urge us to hope, in spite of all the controversy surrounding his death, that Tchaikovsky, even after suffering so many personal hardships and tragedies during his lifetime, had lived a full and beautiful life. By examining some of his final letters, Poznansky ventures that “there is not a single document from the rest of [Tchaikovsky’s] life that can be construed as an expression of self-torment on account of his homosexuality” and that “some occasional expressions of nostalgia for family life are perfectly understandable in a bachelor, and have nothing to do with sexual orientation”.63

Indeed, the conclusion of *Romeo and Juliet* bears witness to the transcendence of the lovers – and with some hermeneutic optimism, of Tchaikovsky – not only over mortal calamities but also over confining definitions of gender and sexuality altogether. Recalling Tchaikovsky’s own words, there only exist, in the end, all kinds of musical beauties and natural beauties spurred on by none other than “love, love, and love. … Love not frightened or stopped by anything!”

---

Works Cited


