

The Musicology Review

vii–xxii

© The Author 2021

<https://ucd.ie/music>



The Grand Illusion: Listening to Tchaikovsky's *Symphonie Pathétique*

Ciarán Crilly

Head of the School of Music
University College Dublin

The Grand Illusion: Listening to Tchaikovsky's *Symphonie Pathétique*

Ciarán Crilly

Foreword: Closer Reading

This article is based on a public talk that was delivered in advance of a live performance of Tchaikovsky's *Symphonie Pathétique* for one of the UCD Symphony Orchestra's *Closer Reading* concerts. Presented at the Astra Hall on the UCD campus on 15 November 2019, this was the second in a planned series that was subsequently paused due to post-pandemic restrictions for music performance.¹ In revisiting it for the new iteration of *The Musicology Review*, certain content that might be considered a form of 'public musicology' has necessarily been subjected to elisions and alterations in order to address a readership rather than an audience. Thus, instead of being a broad commentary on the background and content of the work in question, alighting upon 'leading' themes and ideas contained therein for the purposes of a live listening experience, what is offered here is a context for interpretation, retaining elements of analysis, history, and hermeneutics that informed the original talk.²

The *Closer Reading* introductions are interspersed with key excerpts performed by the orchestra, and occasionally at the keyboard. Many of these can be represented in print in the form of score samples, but as some are demonstrated live in order to elucidate matters of voicing or orchestration only, their impact cannot be adequately conveyed within these pages.³ This hints at significant questions on the nature of listening—as opposed to addressing content via the purely visual form of the printed score—that shall be explored later in terms of the listener's role within live performance contexts in particular. In appraising Tchaikovsky's final symphony, the subsequent text is indebted to major exegeses on the work by Timothy L. Jackson and Marina Ritzarev, whose ideas are expounded in dedicated monographs published in 1999 and 2014 respectively. It is also reliant upon the documentary evidence of the composer's final months as recorded by the celebrated Tchaikovsky scholar Alexander Poznansky.⁴

(Re)Writing History

A mythology has enshrouded the conception and first performance of the *Symphonie Pathétique* like almost no other in the history of Western art music. Perhaps only Mozart's

¹ The first such concert (27 March 2019) was on Shostakovich's Piano Concerto No. 2. A third was planned to take place with a guest orchestra as part of the 18th Annual Plenary Conference of the Society for Musicology in Ireland in June 2020; the subject of which was to be Beethoven's Symphony No. 7.

² In an appraisal of topic theory, Julian Horton notes how the application of such a method can 'bridge the gaps between, analysis, hermeneutics, and history', but that it is more challenging when applied to music of the nineteenth century rather than the classical era. Julian Horton, "Listening to Topics in the Nineteenth Century," in *The Oxford Handbook of Topic Theory*, ed. Danuta Mirka (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2016): 642.

³ One such example would be the interwoven lines at the beginning of the last movement when an 'aggregate' descending theme is heard between the two violin sections when playing together, but fragmented when heard separately. This is cited later in Example 8.

⁴ Timothy L. Jackson, *Tchaikovsky: Symphony No. 6 (Pathétique)* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999). Marina Ritzarev, *Tchaikovsky's Pathétique and Russian Culture* (Oxford and New York: Ashgate, 2014). Alexander Poznansky, *Tchaikovsky's Last Days: A Documentary Study* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press 1996).

Requiem would rival it for tantalizing levels of intrigue and uncertainty, which in Mozart's case is further heightened by a quasi-supernatural tone, originating from the well-worn tale of a mysterious 'grey-clad emissary' who arrived at his door to commission the work. The Sixth Symphony was of course Tchaikovsky's final major composition, sketched between February and April 1893, orchestrated and completed in August.⁵ The first performance took place in St Petersburg on 28 October, with the composer's death occurring just nine days later, on 6 November. Public interpretations of its message sprang up almost immediately: was it, for example, 'a kind of musical suicide note, a personal requiem, as was widely believed after the second, posthumous performance?'⁶ The persistent enigma proved too irresistible for commentators in subsequent decades. Any gaps or inconsistencies in the chronicling of his final days fuelled curiosity and over-imaginative responses, as 'speculating biographers tried to find traces of conspiracy and cover-up among Tchaikovsky's doctors and relatives'.⁷

Interest was piqued in the 1970s when the Russian scholar Alexandra Orlova popularized the hypothesis that Tchaikovsky was urged to commit suicide in order to avoid national condemnation as a result of his supposedly improper lifestyle by a 'court of honour', constituting some of his classmates from the School of Jurisprudence. It was codified in an article co-written with David Brown in 1981 for *Music & Letters*, and a widespread embrace of this account naturally fanned the flames of lurid speculation surrounding the composer's life and death, primarily his acquiescence to the call for such a drastic measure by ingesting unboiled water during a rampant cholera outbreak.⁸ That he died of cholera is almost certain, as supported by contemporaneous testimony from his physician and others, and it follows that the disease may well have been contracted from drinking infected water, although this may have been done so carelessly rather than impulsively or under duress.⁹

With the composer's death following the premiere so closely, it was reasonable to view the symphony as a public suicide note, with its progressive revocation of a traditionally jubilant denouement in favour of a valedictory one. A creative approach to recording history easily followed, conflating myth with myth, and even encroaching into literary realms. The most obvious parallel was the familiar Socrates legend, with a trial and the damning accusation of corrupting youth, leading to an enforced suicide by drinking hemlock.¹⁰ An arch-romantic reimagining might absorb the real lives of Lord Byron and

⁵ These adhere to the Julian Calendar dates as referenced by Jackson, which he notes were used in Russia until 1918. See: Jackson, *Tchaikovsky: Symphony No. 6*, 122, n. 2. Poznansky, Ritzarev, and Philip Ross Bullock employ the Gregorian Calendar, which would place the specified dates twelve days earlier. See: Philip Ross Bullock, *Pyotr Tchaikovsky* (London: Reaktion Books, 2016).

⁶ Jackson, *Tchaikovsky: Symphony No. 6*, 2. The concert referred to here was the memorial concert arranged by the Imperial Russian Musical Society on Saturday 18 November that also featured performances of the Violin Concerto and *Romeo & Juliet*. See: Poznansky, *Tchaikovsky's Last Days*, 186–187.

⁷ Poznansky, *Tchaikovsky's Last Days*, 118.

⁸ Alexandra Orlova and David Brown, "Tchaikovsky: The Last Chapter," *Music & Letters* 62, no. 2 (April 1981): 125–145.

⁹ For more, see: "Illness: 21 October–22 October", in Poznansky, *Tchaikovsky's Last Days*, 79–101.

¹⁰ This is addressed during a brief postlude in Jackson, 114–115. He states: "There are many similarities between Orlova's Tchaikovsky and Plato's Socrates: both are elderly homosexuals who surround themselves with coteries of adoring young men, both worship beauty and are prepared to sacrifice everything for it, and, ultimately, both are forced to commit suicide for "corrupting youth"."

Oscar Wilde, both subject to sexual scandal and ultimate exile. There are resonant overtones too in Thomas Mann's *Death in Venice* (1912), which confronts infatuation with a youth and death by cholera. Its postlapsarian tragedy is accentuated in Luchino Visconti's dreamlike film version (1971), in which Aschenbach the novelist is transformed into a fêted composer, with intimations of Gustav Mahler, but Tchaikovsky cannot have been far from the director's mind.¹¹

A case against interpreting the symphony as a suicide note is compellingly made by reports of the composer's generally buoyant mood in the weeks before his death, and his reverence for the work itself, which he claimed to love 'as I have never loved any other of my musical offspring'.¹² In a letter from August 1893, Tchaikovsky wrote: 'I do not suffer from want and can in general consider myself a happy person'.¹³ Poznansky, based on his thorough documentary evidence from this period, reported: 'Several eyewitnesses concur that Tchaikovsky was in exceptionally fine form during the days immediately preceding his illness.'¹⁴ The escalating mythology continued to feed interpretations of the music nonetheless: reading and rereading the 'text' in search of hidden clues. Of primary significance is the composer's dedication of the work to his nephew Vladimir Davidov, known as Bob. Jackson asserts that 'the narrative programme of the Sixth Symphony is intimately related to Tchaikovsky's relationship with Bob Davidov' and explores the spectre of inappropriate contact, not because of sexuality but rather their difference in age and close kinship.¹⁵ Tchaikovsky first acknowledged feelings for Bob in 1878, at which time the composer was 44 and his nephew 12. A diary entry from May that year reads: 'As soon as I stop working or go out for a stroll... I begin to long for Bob and grow melancholy without him.'¹⁶ Jackson observes that the composer 'engaged in behaviour that might be condemned today as paedophilia', and that his known relationships with much younger men were potentially very damaging; Bob himself committed suicide in 1906 at the age of 34.¹⁷

Discarding the suicidal narrative, the quasi-autobiographical nature of a doomed, taboo love story surely remains. Bob's centrality to the symphony's possible programme—and note that Tchaikovsky had reportedly claimed that there was one but did not wish it to be revealed—can be read as central to the Byronic hero type so prevalent nineteenth-century literature and music.¹⁸ The last line of the following passage from Byron's *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*, written in 1812, encapsulates the forlorn hero who is tormented by a forbidden love in which sinfulness, or amorality, is implicated:

For he through Sin's long labyrinth had run,
Nor made atonement when he did amiss,

¹¹ Visconti's film was released in the same year as Ken Russell's lurid and surreal Tchaikovsky biopic *The Music Lovers* (1971), which he memorably pitched to studio executives at United Artists as being about 'a nymphomaniac who falls in love with a homosexual'. From Ken Russell, "A film about Tchaikovsky? You must be joking," *The Guardian*, July 1, 2004, <https://www.theguardian.com/film/2004/jul/01/1>.

¹² Quoted in Jackson, *Tchaikovsky*, 1.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 19.

¹⁴ Poznansky, *Tchaikovsky's Last Days*, 76.

¹⁵ Jackson, *Tchaikovsky*, 36.

¹⁶ Quoted in Ross Bullock, *Pyotr Tchaikovsky*, 134.

¹⁷ Jackson, *Tchaikovsky*, 38.

¹⁸ See: Poznansky, *Tchaikovsky's Last Days*, 63.

Had sighed to many, though he loved but one,
And that loved one, alas, could ne'er be his.¹⁹

This is also reflective of nineteenth-century—and later—operatic tropes in which perceived ‘otherness’ or non-conformity is ultimately punished. In the symphony, there are musical materials that sit outside comfortable norms—the lopsided 5/4 metre of the second movement, the ambivalent half-diminished sevenths so pervasive in the outer movements—that readily align with an ‘incurable dysfunctionality’ associated with Tchaikovsky’s sexual orientation.²⁰ For a society not entirely at ease with the practice of homosexuality, the trial and suicide myth tidily affirmed his guilt and his contrition; thus, through a perceived martyrdom, he could be rehabilitated as a national composer, perhaps *the* national composer. However, it remains a myth and nothing more: in 1998, Poznansky was able to attest that a ‘series of documents found in recent years present solid evidence against the historical, psychological and medical foundations of the suicide theories, while no new evidence in their support has been discovered’.²¹

Only Connect

On first listen, the most striking aspect of the *Symphonie Pathétique* is its structural plan. Richard Taruskin notes how it ‘was (apart from a few then-unknown early eccentricities by Haydn) the first complete four-movement symphony ever to put the slow movement last’, and it had also been a rarity for a symphony to end in a minor key.²² The *per ardua ad astra* formula, whose standard prototype is Beethoven’s Fifth Symphony, was driven, in part, by an overarching goal of arrival in glorious major from austere minor key beginnings. This is now subverted, as is another great triumphant schema initiated by Beethoven’s *Sinfonia Eroica*, a work in which a valiant protagonist seems to be actively present throughout. Subjective experience is enhanced in Tchaikovsky’s music by the favouring of a literary narrative over a purely symphonic one. Cora Palfy argues how composers such as Schumann, Berlioz and Tchaikovsky ‘refined the musical Beethoven hero to suit the needs of a novel literary hero’.²³ This is most explicitly evidenced in Tchaikovsky’s adherence to a proper chronology, with his ‘lament’ reserved for the ending, in contrast to the positioning of the *Marcia Funebre* as the second movement of the *Eroica*, which thus favours a musical-structural teleology above all.

Another pervasive feature of note is how choices of tempo divulge much about form and the nature of the inherent musical material. The tempo outline of the first movement (*Adagio – Allegro non troppo – Andante – Allegro vivo – Andante – Andante mosso*) corresponds to thematic/structural divisions: introduction, principal subject area, second subject area, development and recapitulation, return of second subject area in tonic major, coda. These also highlight the fundamental topics employed that might be labeled ‘lugubrious’ (*Adagio*),

¹⁹ Quoted in Cora Palfy, “Anti-hero Worship: The Emergence of the ‘Byronic hero’ Archetype in the Nineteenth Century,” *Indiana Theory Review* 32, no. 1–2 (Spring/Fall 2016): 163.

²⁰ Jackson, *Tchaikovsky*, 57.

²¹ Alexander Poznansky, “Tchaikovsky: A Life Reconsidered,” in *Tchaikovsky and his World*, ed. Leslie Kearney (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998): 50.

²² Richard Taruskin, *The Oxford History of Western Music: Music in the Nineteenth Century* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 799.

²³ Palfy, “Anti-hero Worship,” 194.

‘tempest’ (*Allegro*), and ‘appassionato’ or ‘bel canto’ (*Andante*).²⁴ In terms of the organization of material in the overall structure, there are two *Adagios*—the premonitory opening bars and the final movement (*Adagio lamentoso*), three *Allegros*—the principal subject area of the first movement (*Allegro non troppo*), and the two middle movements (*Allegro con grazia* and *Allegro molto vivace*). The ‘outlier’ is the *Andante*, which incorporates the explicitly conveyed love music and its—perhaps premature—approbation in the coda.

As for the name *Pathétique*, it was long assumed that the composer’s brother Modest had suggested it the day after the premiere, a claim made in the biography he published around a decade later; Poznansky again is able to supply evidence to refute this, and surmises that the title was actually decided upon by Tchaikovsky himself weeks earlier.²⁵ The employment of this particular sobriquet invokes Beethoven once more, and the similarity between the opening of the B minor symphony and the C minor piano sonata is regularly cited, with its contour of a rising tone and semitone, followed by a falling semitone (Examples 1 and 2).



Example 1: Opening of Beethoven’s *Grande Sonate Pathétique*.



Example 2: Opening bassoon solo in the symphony.

This is more conspicuous when the symphony’s opening is compared with two statements from the development section in the first movement of the sonata, which occur with the same pitches (E–F#–G–F#), although in different registers (Examples 2, 3 and 4).



Example 3: Beethoven’s *Pathétique*, bars 140–141.



Example 4: Beethoven’s *Pathétique*, bars 146–147.

The bassoon solo sets forth a relatively rudimentary basic idea, akin to a conflation of the two ‘prime cells’ identified in Rudolph Reti’s analysis of the piano sonata featured in his book *Thematic Patterns in Sonatas of Beethoven*, published posthumously in 1967; the first cell is C–D–E^b, the second A^b–D–E^b.²⁶ The following statement from Reti could apply equally to either work: ‘The basic thematic idea of the *Pathétique*, the core of its structural

²⁴ From Julian Horton’s list of nineteenth-century topics, collated from Agawu and others. Note that Tchaikovsky’s *Francesca da Rimini*, composed in 1877, commences with an *Andante lugubre*.

²⁵ Poznansky, *Tchaikovsky’s Last Days*, 63.

²⁶ Rudolph Reti, *Thematic Patterns in Sonatas of Beethoven* (New York: Da Capo, 1992), 17.

life, will be found to be a combination of these two cells'.²⁷ It would be simpler, perhaps, to reduce the two to a single prime cell, founded upon the first four notes of the sonata in the treble voice (C–D–E^b–D), especially on account of the significance of the falling semitone throughout the transition (bars 35–50) and the bass figure in bars 149–158 of the development. So a prime motive is generated in the first two bars of the symphony, although commencing in the key of E minor rather than the eventual home key of B minor. We can identify it as a 'longing' motive, as it contains gestures of expectation (rising) and resignation (falling), or perhaps simply the '*Pathétique*' motive, which also stresses its correspondence to Beethoven. It is heard as a discrete idea, now in B minor, at the start of the exposition in violas (Example 5).²⁸



Example 5: Beginning of the first movement *Allegro non troppo*, statement, upper violas (rewritten in treble clef).

It reappears in varied guises, as part of a subtle cyclical strategy, in the second and fourth movements. In the second movement, a reordered D–B–C# version completes the first melodic phrase (Example 6) and a contracted form (minus the initial C#) occurs in the third bar of the middle section at letter E (Example 7).



Example 6: Opening melody of the second movement, cellos.



Example 7: Theme from middle section of the second movement.

When the first and second violin lines from the opening of the *Adagio lamentoso* are expressed as a melodic 'aggregate', representing what is heard cumulatively between each part, the result is a descending line whose two-bar consequent statement ends with another version of the prime motive (Example 8). In this instance, bars 3–4 match the pitch outline of the middle section theme from the second movement (Example 7) with an altered harmonic context in terms of chromatic richness and the rate of harmonic change, although half-diminished seventh chords are common to both. The final phrase also links to the isolated cadential figure in the symphony's introduction (bars 12–15) that effects a prolongation of the dominant seventh in B minor over the last eight bars before the *Allegro non troppo* commences.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Bar numbers and rehearsal figures refer to Breitkopf & Härtel's 1994 edition of the score.



Example 8: 'Aggregate' melodic opening of the *Adagio lamentoso*.

There are other cyclical connections within the symphony, notably the stepwise ascent from mediant to tonic in the major mode that opens the second movement (Example 6), complemented or completed by the descending F#–E–D that begins the middle section at Letter D (Example 8). It is inverted in the third movement with an assertive stepwise descent from tonic to mediant heard in antiphonal statements from the third bar of Letter E. However, the cyclical nature of the Sixth is not as pronounced as in the Fourth and Fifth symphonies, both of which employ introductory motto themes associated 'with the agency of fate'.²⁹ Jackson argues that not only is the Sixth bound by a 'macro-symphonic super-sonata form comprising over one thousand measures', but it is also part of a meta-symphonic structure that unifies the three late symphonies. To conceive of the *Pathétique* in this light helps to account for the opening in E minor, the key of his Fifth Symphony, rather than the global tonic of B minor, implying a very deliberate tactic of contextualizing the work within his oeuvre, especially within his cycle of symphonies. The thematic association with Beethoven in turn conveys its 'meta-canonic' status, which is consistent with the esteem in which he held the work.

The play of E minor and B minor invokes some of his other major narrative symphonic works. E minor is also the tonality of the dark literary 'Symphonic Fantasy' *Francesca da Rimini*, based on the character—although a real historical figure—from Dante's *Inferno*, while B minor is the key of the *Manfred Symphony*, whose hero is 'tormented by hopeless longings and the memory of past crimes'.³⁰ Ritzarev observes that, in the Sixth Symphony, Tchaikovsky 'did not construct a grandiose *Manfred*-like tone-drama, an attempt to convey an objective narrative through the subjective world of the protagonist', but it is credible that he wished for the link to be made regardless.³¹ A more compelling tonal-harmonic ancestry can be found in *Tristan und Isolde*, with the *Tristan Chord* acting as a specified metaphor for sexual dysfunctionality in Jackson's reading.³² The half-diminished seventh, upon which it is based, is heard no fewer than ten times in the finale alone, including its opening harmony, and as part of the final cadence: a half-diminished seventh on C# resolving to B minor over a pulsating tonic pedal. In the first movement, it occurs twice featuring the pitches (F–G#–B–D#) of the original, but not its spacing. These are in the final statement of the *Andante* theme two bars before Letter S, and again four bars later, this time tellingly marked *sf*.

Expectation – Resignation – Lamentation

The '*Pathétique*' motive, as previously suggested, signifies expectation and resignation in a compact form. The expectation of upward motion is even more pronounced at the

²⁹ Julian Horton, "Cyclical thematic processes in the nineteenth-century symphony," in *The Cambridge Companion to the Symphony*, ed. Julian Horton (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 212.

³⁰ Tchaikovsky's programme for *Manfred*, quoted in Ross Bullock, *Pyotr Tchaikovsky*, 142.

³¹ Ritzarev, *Tchaikovsky's Pathétique and Russian Culture*, 47.

³² Jackson, *Tchaikovsky*, 57.

beginning of *Tristan*, for which a rising chromatic step (G# to A) constitutes a ‘longing’ motive: ‘a literal representation of painful yearning’.³³ Tchaikovsky had offered his own version in his fantasy overture *Romeo & Juliet*, in which the celebrated love theme begins in three different ways. It is first heard diatonically, commencing on the dominant degree of the scale (Example 9), then preceded by a raised fourth (Example 10), and finally a flattened sixth (Example 11), charting a progression from innocence (a first glance perhaps), through expectation and yearning, to resignation and acceptance.



Example 9: First statement of the *Romeo & Juliet* love theme in D-flat major, cor anglais, and violas.



Example 10: Third statement now in D major, unison strings.



Example 11: Final complete statement, unison strings with additional doublings.

The next stage is lamentation, insinuated by the *Adagio lamentoso* tempo/mood designation of the finale, which points to the thematic relevance of the *basso lamento*: a stepwise descent, whether chromatic or modal, from tonic to dominant that was particularly significant in music of the Baroque era. It appears, for example, in the sigh-infused ‘Crucifixus’ from Bach’s *B Minor Mass*, but its most celebrated manifestation is probably in ‘When I am laid in earth’ from Purcell’s *Dido & Aeneas*, popularly known as ‘Dido’s Lament’. Here it forms part of a chromatic-cadential ground bass that underpins the entire aria (Example 12).



Example 12: Ground bass from Purcell’s ‘When I am laid in earth’.



Example 13: Opening of the vocal line of Dido’s lament.

³³ Steven Huebner, “Tristan’s Traces,” in *Richard Wagner: Tristan und Isolde*, ed. Arthur Groos (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 146.

Coincidentally, in the first phrase of Dido’s vocal line, we again encounter the pitch contour of Tchaikovsky’s—and Beethoven’s—‘*Pathétique*’ motive (Example 13).

The symphony’s ‘lament’ theme, initially heard in D major, is constructed upon the modal form of the *basso lamento*, and later includes a sequence of miniature descents that will eventually yield a terminal decline towards the depths from which the symphony first emerged (Example 14).



Example 14: ‘Lament’ theme in D major from the *Adagio lamentoso*, violins and violas.

Alex Ross has noted how Tchaikovsky ‘combines the modal and chromatic forms of the lament pattern, creating a hybrid element of grief.’³⁴ This is achieved by means of antiphonal statements between violins (modal) and cellos (chromatic), now in the tonic B minor (Examples 15 and 16).



Example 15: ‘Lament’ theme in B minor, violins.



Example 16: Chromatic antiphonal response, cellos.

What should not escape our notice is that the *basso lamento* is present from the very beginning of the *Pathétique*, describing a chromatic descent from E to B in lower double basses beneath the bassoon solo (Example 17).



Example 17: Opening of the first movement, lower double basses.

Occurring at the outset in this way, in combination with the ‘*Pathétique*’ motive, it establishes a despondent tone that foreshadows the hero’s inescapable destiny.

The Grand Illusion

Returning to the *Tristan Chord*, its vagrant uncertainty remains improperly resolved throughout the opera, akin to Tristan’s unhealed wound, that is until the final scene; the eventual arrival in B major equates with the death of the eponymous lovers and their idealized spiritual transfiguration. So in the symphony, the final chord of the introduction—a first inversion dominant seventh in B minor—is not permitted to fulfill

³⁴ Alex Ross, “Chacona, Lamento, Walking Bass: Bass Lines of Music History” in *Listen to This* (New York: Picador, 2011), 47.

its harmonic goal until the coda of the finale. Before this, there has been no authentic cadence in B minor, just the false hope expressed by the stable B major coda of the first movement. The signal moment in the finale is the solitary tam-tam stroke (letter L) that heralds a prolongation of the dominant before a final resolution in death and descent. It is an epic suspension that—like *Tristan*—has spanned almost the entirety of the work. It can be suggested that this harmonic suspension has a dramatic analogue in Alfred Hitchcock's psychological thriller *Vertigo* (1958), based upon a classic interpretation that dates back to Robin Wood's 1965 study *Hitchcock's Films*.³⁵ Musing on the principal character Scottie, as he hangs precariously from a gutter atop a tall building at the end of the first scene, Wood writes: "There seems to be no possible way he could have got down. The effect is having him, throughout the film, metaphorically suspended over a great abyss."³⁶ The idea was later embellished by James F. Maxwell:

I am therefore going to pursue the perhaps radical notion that *Vertigo* may best be regarded as an extended equivalent of Ambrose Bierce's story ... *An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge*: that everything after the opening sequence is the dream or fantasy of a dying man (it makes no difference whether the dream occurs while he hangs from the gutter, as he falls to the street, or when he lies dying on the pavement).³⁷

Bierce's extremely popular and influential tale was published by the *San Francisco Examiner* in 1890 and is set during the American Civil War. The protagonist's predicament is rapidly established at the very beginning, as follows:

A man stood upon a railroad bridge in northern Alabama, looking down into the swift water twenty feet below. The man's hands were behind his back, the wrists bound with a cord. A rope closely encircled his neck.³⁸

This is succeeded by a fortuitous twist as the rope breaks and falls into the stream. He thus evades death and proceeds to make a daring escape, spurred by the possibility of seeing his wife and family once again. Eventually he reaches his wife, who wears 'a smile of ineffable joy', then another twist:

As he is about to clasp her he feels a stunning blow upon the back of the neck; a blinding white light blazes all about him with a sound like the shock of a cannon – then all is darkness and silence!

Peyton Fahrquhar was dead; his body, with a broken neck, swung gently from side to side beneath the timbers of the Owl Creek bridge.³⁹

³⁵ Robin Wood, *Hitchcock's Films* (London: Tantivy Press, 1965). Quoted in Charles Barr, *Vertigo* (London: British Film Institute, 2002), 32.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ James F. Maxwell, "A Dreamer and his Dream: Another Way of Looking at *Vertigo*," *Film Criticism* 14, no. 3 (Spring 1990), 4.

³⁸ Ambrose Bierce, "An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge," in *The Devil's Dictionary, Tales & Memoirs* (New York: The Library of America, 2011), 10.

³⁹ Ibid., 19.

His death delivers a shock to the reader that parallels with the brusqueness of the opening and the brutality of the story's return to reality from an untroubled fantasy. *An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge* has been subject to numerous adaptations, and variations on its theme have materialized repeatedly in popular culture.⁴⁰ Perhaps the *Pathétique*, like Bierce's disquieting story and Hitchcock's haunted film, is the dying fantasy of a doomed individual, with visions of sensual bliss and public condemnation (in the first movement), dysfunctionality (second movement), heroism and triumph (third movement), despair and death (finale). Rather than a *Symphonie Pathétique*, it may be reclassified as a *Symphonie Fantastique*, a grand illusion played out in the composer's mind alone. The hero, rather than representing the creator, becomes a romanticized and idealized upgrade. Thus the story can compellingly adhere to a dramatic and poetic arc without recourse to prosaic reality, and the protagonist can wonder:

Was it a vision, or a waking dream?
Fled is that music:—Do I wake or sleep?⁴¹

Coda: Modes of Listening

In assessing the influence of topics on musical expression, Robert L. Martin has suggested that 'the real and important effect of the topics is to give to the work a feeling of being connected to other experiences of life'.⁴² The recognition of, or identification with, topics is therefore an integral of listening, but the nature of their application was transformed during the nineteenth century according to Kofi Agawu:

When a composer prefers ambiguously defined topics to precisely defined ones – such as dances – the “romantic” tendency becomes quite pronounced in his music... what I am getting at is a larger historical point – that along with the nineteenth century comes an emphasis on topics that are increasingly less concerned with stylized identity and that therefore take one aspect of a work's discourse out of the public realm into a composer's private world. This is not, however, a claim that there are no public codes in nineteenth-century music, or, conversely, that private codes are missing from late eighteenth-century music. There is, rather, a shift in emphasis from public meanings to private.⁴³

This shift is crucial to our engagement with the *Pathétique*, as universal messages are wilfully obscured: the waltz is disfigured by being cast in 5/4 rather than 3/4, while the

⁴⁰ The final part of Martin Scorsese's *The Last Temptation of Christ* (1988), for example, based upon a novel by Nikos Kazantzakis, betrays elements of the dying man's fantasy as Christ succumbs to the 'temptation' of an alternate reality that he eventually rejects in order to fulfill his messianic destiny. Taking a lead from Marina Ritzarev (*Tchaikovsky's Pathétique and Russian Culture*), a further link could be made with the *Pathétique*, as she advances a narrative reading of the symphony depicting the Passion and Death of Christ as portrayed in the gospels.

⁴¹ From John Keats, "Ode to A Nightingale," quoted in Saviour Catania, "'Truth Beauty' as 'Waking Dream': Hitchcock's 'Vertigo' and the 'Mystic Oxymoron' of Keats's poetry," *Literature/Film Quarterly* 44, no. 1 (2016), 19. This article proposes Keatsian themes within Hitchcock's *Vertigo*.

⁴² Robert L. Martin "Musical 'Topics' and Expression in Music," *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, Autumn 53, no. 4 (Autumn, 1995), 420.

⁴³ V. Kofi Agawu, *Playing with Signs: A Semiotic Interpretation of Classic Music* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 1991), 51.

march is amalgamated with a bustling scherzo, over which it eventually triumphs. The success of the march, however, is weakened by its adherence to the tempo set by the scherzo material with which the movement begins (*Allegro molto vivace*).⁴⁴ If a triumph is grasped too hastily, it is no triumph at all: the hero has merely won the battle, but not the war. Ultimately, Tchaikovsky's topical distortions affirm his commitment to the perceived private world of the composer, granting the listener greater subjectivity verging on interactivity.

Nicholas Cook recently observed that 'musicology has traditionally focused on scores rather than performances'.⁴⁵ In the same text, he asserted that 'live performance brings performer and listener into co-presence and establishes a relationship that works in both directions', and later that 'listening is an embodied experience'.⁴⁶ These latter statements hold true as a general rule for all live music, regardless of specific sets of performers or a particular interpretation. When listening to Tchaikovsky's symphony, the incompleteness of narrative specificity is actually preferable. With an explicit diegesis in place—whether in the form of a 'texted' narrative or a narrative text—the demand for a psychophysical response would be rejected in favour of an alternative, lesser mode of engagement. Without that diegesis, the listener is granted quasi-directorial authority: the musical equivalent of a point-of-view shot, implicating our participation and influencing our response. The symphony may be considered to display proto-cinematic overtones, and these are recognized by Marina Ritzarev when she notes that: 'like a modern cameraman, the composer plays with different facets, focusing on one or the other or generalizing the whole picture'.⁴⁷ Even one of its earliest critics acknowledged how the closing *Adagio lamentoso* seemed to be 'accompanying something taking place on stage'.⁴⁸

Because of the *Pathétique's* dramatic subjectivity and location in a private rather than overtly public realm, we are more prepared to assume a role akin to cinematic surrogacy, empathizing with the 'hero' precisely because his/her identity is so imprecise. Further still, as a member of the audience in a live performance, we can thus *embody* this role. The condition is accentuated by the impact of registral and dynamic extremities perceived at a physical as well as an auditory level, and the implied entrainment of a waning heartbeat that constitutes its final gesture. The illusory, oneiric nature of the symphony allows us to become a 'surrogate body' as defined by Christiane Voss in reference to the immersive phenomenon of movie-going.⁴⁹ She argues that the 'spectator constitutes, as a resonating body in need of further determination, the illusion-forming medium of cinema'. Similarly, as listener-spectators, we are incorporated into the illusion-forming medium of music. Our ignorance of the unrevealed programme, known only to the composer, generates the perfect conditions for this engagement, which happens in a space between literary

⁴⁴ While some conductors have exercised an interpretative license to convey the final statement (the second bar of FF) at a more suitable 'martial' speed, there is no such instruction in the score.

⁴⁵ Nicholas Cook, "Making Music Together" in *Music as Creative Practice* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018), iBook.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Ritzarev, *Tchaikovsky's Pathétique*, 109.

⁴⁸ St Petersburg-based critic Herman Laroche (1845–1904) quoted in *ibid.*, 47–48.

⁴⁹ The term 'surrogate body' is a translation of *Leihkörper*, literally meaning 'loan body'. See: Christiane Voss, "Film Experience and the Formation of Illusion: The Spectator as 'Surrogate Body' for the Cinema," trans. Inga Pollmann and Vinzenz Hediger, *Cinema Journal* 50, no. 4 (Summer 2011): 136–150.

narrative and abstract musical gestures. The 'grand illusion' can thus signify both the fantastical nature of the composer's creative imagination and the reassessed (inter)active role of the listener-spectator in experiencing the symphony as an untexted narrative.

Bibliography

- Agawu, V. Kofi. *Playing with Signs: A Semiotic Interpretation of Classic Music*. Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 1991.
- Barr, Charles. *Vertigo*. London: British Film Institute, 2002.
- Bierce, Ambrose. "An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge." In *The Devil's Dictionary, Tales & Memoirs*, 10–19. New York: The Library of America, 2011.
- Cook, Nicholas. *Music as Creative Practice*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2018, iBook.
- Horton, Julian. "Listening to Topics in the Nineteenth Century." In *The Oxford Handbook of Topic Theory*, edited Danuta Mirka, 642–664. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2016.
- . "Cyclical thematic processes in the nineteenth-century symphony." In *The Cambridge Companion to the Symphony*, edited by Julian Horton, 190–231. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013.
- Huebner, Steven. "Tristan's Traces," in *Richard Wagner: Tristan und Isolde*, edited by Arthur Groos, 142–166. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011.
- Jackson, Timothy L. *Tchaikovsky: Symphony No. 6 (Pathétique)*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999.
- Keats, John. "Ode to A Nightingale", quoted in Saviour Catania, "'Truth Beauty' as 'Waking Dream': Hitchcock's 'Vertigo' and the 'Mystic Oxymoron' of Keats's poetry," *Literature/Film Quarterly* 44, no. 1 (2016): 19–33.
- Martin, Robert L. "Musical 'Topics' and Expression in Music." *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 53, no. 4 (Autumn, 1995): 417–424.
- Maxwell, James F. "A Dreamer and his Dream: Another Way of Looking at *Vertigo*." *Film Criticism* 14, no. 3 (Spring 1990): 3–13.
- Orlova, Alexandra and David Brown. "Tchaikovsky: The Last Chapter." *Music & Letters* 62, no. 2 (April 1981): 125–145.
- Palfy, Cora. "Anti-hero Worship: The Emergence of the 'Byronic hero' Archetype in the Nineteenth Century." *Indiana Theory Review* 32, no. 1–2 (Spring/Fall 2016): 161–198.
- Poznansky, Alexander. "Tchaikovsky: A Life Reconsidered." In *Tchaikovsky and his World*, edited by Leslie Kearney, 3–54. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998.
- . *Tchaikovsky's Last Days: A Documentary Study*. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1996.
- Reti, Rudolph. *Thematic Patterns in Sonatas of Beethoven*. New York: Da Capo, 1992.

- Ritzarev, Marina. *Tchaikovsky's Pathétique and Russian Culture*. Oxford and New York: Ashgate, 2014.
- Ross, Alex. "Chacona, Lamento, Walking Bass: Bass Lines of Music History." In *Listen to This*, 22–54. New York: Picador, 2011.
- Ross Bullock, Philip. *Pyotr Tchaikovsky*. London: Reaktion Books, 2016.
- Russell, Ken. "A film about Tchaikovsky? You must be joking." *The Guardian*, July 1, 2004. <https://www.theguardian.com/film/2004/jul/01/1>.
- Taruskin, Richard. *The Oxford History of Western Music: Music in the Nineteenth Century*. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2005.
- Voss, Christiane. "Film Experience and the Formation of Illusion: The Spectator as 'Surrogate Body' for the Cinema." Translated by Inga Pollmann and Vinzenz Hediger. *Cinema Journal* 50, no. 4 (Summer 2011): 136–150.
- Wood, Robin. *Hitchcock's Films*. London: Tantivy Press, 1965.