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Whose Tchaikovsky? Consumerism, nationality, sex and the curious case of the disappearing composer in *Tchaikovsky* and *The Music Lovers*

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Abstract: This article offers the first sustained analysis of two films about the life of the composer Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky made in 1969 and 1970 respectively. One of these, Ken Russell's *The Music Lovers* (1970), is well known in the West. The other, *Tchaikovsky* (1969) by Igor Talankin, is much less famous. The films were made across the divide of the Cold War, and though it might be tempting to see these biopics as mirror-images of one another, rival products of different political and social cultures, this article tempers such a reading in order to explore some unintended but nevertheless suggestive parallels between the two. Exploring both through their treatment of consumerism, nationality (specifically Russianness) and sexuality, the article argues that for different reasons and in slightly different ways, they offer a significant case study in how “problematic” aspects of a composer's life can be obscured to the point where they disappear. This in turn makes the films an important point of reference for how “otherness”—particularly national and sexual “otherness”—has historically been handled by the big screen.

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Keywords: Tchaikovsky, classical music, biopic, Igor Talankin, Ken Russell, consumerism, nationality, Russianness, homosexuality



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PUBLIC INTEREST STATEMENT

This article discusses two films which were made in 1969 and 1970 about the nineteenth-century Russian composer Tchaikovsky. These are Igor Talankin's *Tchaikovsky* and Ken Russell's *The Music Lovers*. The piece argues that while these films are products of the Cold War, produced on either side of a divide, they should not be seen as polar opposites. Instead, it argues, they share some similarities in how they deal with Tchaikovsky's relationship with his listeners, his Russianness and his sexuality. Since the films are uncomfortable with some of the realities of Tchaikovsky's life, perhaps above all his homosexuality, it suggests that they manage to make much of him “disappear”. The article therefore seeks to contribute to the study of cinema during the Cold War, to discussion of films about composers' lives, and to explore what the act of erasing aspects of Tchaikovsky reveals about how his life has been portrayed.

Within a year of each other, from opposite sides of the world and a nuclear stand-off, there appeared in 1969–1970 two very different films about the life of the composer Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky (1840–1893).¹ Though exact contemporaries, the respective directors could hardly have been less similar. Igor Talankin (1927–2010) was a loyal citizen of the Soviet Union. Trained at the Moscow State Film Institute, his *Tchaikovsky* was released in 1969 by Mosfilm, the most important of the Soviet state-controlled cinema studios. Ken Russell (1927–2011) may require even briefer introduction. Already a controversial figure by the time he directed *The Music Lovers* in 1970, Russell was resistant to Western institutional authority, a maverick, in love with classical music and sharing his idiosyncratic and increasingly explicit view of it. The stage ought to have seemed set. And yet, these views of a composer across a divide—geographical, cultural and political—appear, oddly, more to complement each other as parallel interpretations rather than as relics of Cold War antagonism. Indeed, it may seem remarkable that Talankin and Russell felt drawn towards the same subject at almost precisely the same time. Russell’s film—an often gaudy showcase of the permissiveness of English-speaking cinema at the time—remains (in)famous, while Talankin’s film, an introspective and sober product of Brezhnev’s Soviet Union, seems almost to have melted into the shadows. (It has been referred to as “alternately formulaic and confusing”, “stiff, respectable” and “lumbering and witless”).² As Graffy has noted, part of the reason for this may be a mixture of pre-*Glasnost* lack of familiarity with Soviet cinema and condescension on the part of Western critics; Graffy’s study of East-West cultural exchange between 1960 and 1990 as glimpsed through the pages of *Sight and Sound* contains, significantly, no mention of Talankin (Graffy, 2012). If reputation is anything to go by, then Russell’s *Tchaikovsky* is *the* *Tchaikovsky* to have survived the years.

The title of this article—“Whose Tchaikovsky?”—may seem to promise an answer further down the line, a commitment either to Talankin’s vision of Tchaikovsky or Russell’s. Yet, my understanding of these works is that they are not best served by a binary *either-or* approach, a strategy which might tempt us to fit the evidence of the films to preconceived ideas about, say, a “permissive” and a “conservative” Tchaikovsky or, lurking behind these labels, a “Western” and a “Soviet” Tchaikovsky. This essay proposes that these two films tell us something about the nature of the musical biopic c.1970, and more specifically about these directors’ perceptions of the impact of the consumer revolution in the West, of national identity, and of attitudes towards sexuality (and particularly “deviant” sexuality) at a time when reform was frozen in the East and only just beginning to occur in the West. It suggests that in the case of Tchaikovsky a nexus of assumptions about these three ways of identifying and characterising a historical figure—as a creator of “consumer product”, as an exemplification of a national type, and as a sexual being—comes together in these films both to generate an image of Tchaikovsky far enough removed from historical reality to obscure him and to reveal similar priorities amongst directors working across an East/West divide c.1970. It goes without saying that this was not a conscious project on the part of Talankin and Russell, directors working across a significant political, social and cultural divide, and not all of their assumptions about Tchaikovsky are shared. This is only to be expected of films with such different production contexts. Yet for different reasons they make large parts of Tchaikovsky’s life disappear. Of course, as scholars such as John C. Tibbetts have shown, the problem of the missing composer is a not uncommon one (Pekacz, 2006; Tibbetts, 2005a). In particular, makers of films about composers seem to worry that audiences will grow restless unless they see inspiration descend like a thunderbolt, and this can all too easily reduce what for most creative artists is a long, methodical and painstaking process to visual and emotional cliché. Likewise, the need to create a biographical narrative often fits uncomfortably alongside the obvious and perhaps inescapable musical “soundtrack”, the composer’s work; the result can imprison the music within a narrow programmatic reading, or even create a misleading association which extends beyond and lasts longer than the film itself—an example is the widespread belief that the *Adagietto* from Mahler’s Fifth Symphony is music about dying because it was used so influentially in Luchino Visconti’s *Death in Venice* (1971).³

Taken individually, the first two categories, consumerism and nationality, might not seem to differentiate *Tchaikovsky* or *The Music Lovers* as being especially unusual. The artist as celebrity, as creator of “product” and indeed even as “product” in his (or her) own right, was no new thing in films

about composers c.1970. It had long been a paradigm (particularly in Hollywood) of portrayals of composers such as Frédéric Chopin and Franz Liszt in Charles Vidor's *A Song to Remember* (1945) and *Song Without End* (1960); Liszt would reappear, too, in Russell's *Lisztomania* (1975), where his "pop star" status is nakedly, even satirically, exaggerated. (Strikingly, Russell was not a great admirer of films such as *A Song to Remember*: "just people in costumes doddering around", as he put it. (Tibbetts, 2005b).) Talankin, at work in the Soviet Union and seemingly at ease with what was expected of him, had a parallel tradition on which to draw.⁴ This focused less on the composer as celebrity than on the composer as hero of the people and (where possible) as artist with a vision of the future: the emphasis both in Grigori Roshal's *Mussorgsky* (1950), which explored the composer's empathy with Russian peasants and his attempt to forge a naturalistic style in music, and Grigori Aleksandrov's *The Composer Glinka* (1952), which played up his interest in folk music and the antipathy of the Tsarist regime. (The Soviet regime had characterised the "father" of Russian music as being sympathetic to the Decembrist uprising of 1825.)⁵ While projecting messages about the composer's place within society was long established before Talankin and Russell made their films, I do nevertheless believe that a comparison of *Tchaikovsky* with *The Music Lovers* from the perspective of how they deal with consumerism is telling because they are almost exactly contemporaneous yet created across a divide; and, as we shall see, the Cold War context nudges them to very different conclusions about Tchaikovsky's relationship with the market place.

National identity in films about composers was also not new c.1970. In *A Song to Remember*, Chopin carries with him into exile in Paris soil from his native Poland; in Russell's *Béla Bartók*, made for BBC's Monitor in 1964, much is made of the composer's interest in the folk music of his native Hungary. Yet, certainly as far as Western audiences were concerned, films about specifically Russian composers were relatively thin on the ground. They might have had contact with products of Soviet cinema such as the films by Roshal and Aleksandrov noted above (*Mussorgsky* and *The Composer Glinka* won production awards at the film festivals of Cannes and Locarno in 1951 and 1953 respectively), but these appear to have made little if any impact on Western sensibilities.⁶ Instead, Russia remained an exotic, far-off place as far as many Western watcher-listeners were concerned, its music colourful and seductive, its composers inclined to melancholy and passion.⁷ Exoticism was the mood evoked in Walter Reisch's film loosely based on the life of Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov, *Song of Scheherazade* (1947); a work which relishes the composer's own fascination with the Orient, in the words of Tibbetts it "extends the biopic formula into the realm of a standard Hollywood-style musical fantasy" (Tibbetts, 2005a, p. 56). And the composer as sad but inspired introvert was the key strategy in two films about Tchaikovsky which audiences might have encountered before *Tchaikovsky* and *The Music Lovers*. Neither Benjamin Glazer's *Song of My Heart* (1947) nor Disney's *The Peter Tchaikovsky Story* (1959) moves much beyond cliché; both settle for a rather easy sense of Tchaikovsky's "Russian" melancholy. Meanwhile, Ken Russell's first foray into depicting a Russian composer on screen, *Prokofiev* (1961), was affected by being made for BBC's Monitor, a series which would not at the time allow real historical figures to be portrayed by actors or given dialogue. The piece came to rely on a sense of Prokofiev's music as a "soundtrack" of twentieth-century Russia, with music being set against historical archive footage and scenes from Sergei Eisenstein's films. (Perhaps not inappropriately, given that Prokofiev had offered up his services as a supposedly patriotic composer in writing music for Eisenstein's *Alexander Nevsky* and *Ivan the Terrible* (Morrison, 2009).)

It is the third strand of analysis offered in this article, the way in which *Tchaikovsky* and *The Music Lovers* deal with the composer's sexuality, which I believe fully "activates" the two sets of assumptions above and leads these films to adopt the shape and character they have. By comparison with other screen depictions of composers made around that time, *Tchaikovsky* and *The Music Lovers* are unique in having as their subject a man who was known by both production teams to be homosexual. The homosexuality is perhaps of less consequence than the assumptions and evasions which accrue around it; in particular, there is a shared vision in both films that Tchaikovsky must be highly wrought and doomed.⁸ To this day, Tchaikovsky remains the most famous composer who, in private life, was homosexual; and given that attitudes towards sexuality remain controversial—one

thinks as much of the Western furore over “gay marriage” as of recent “anti-gay” legislation in Putin’s Russia—then the way in which composers like Tchaikovsky are depicted on screen remains a compelling and even important area of cultural history.⁹ This is particularly so when, as I shall argue here, there was a lost opportunity c.1970 when cinema might have led the way in reconfiguring not only our sense of Tchaikovsky but the way in which sexuality is handled in films about historical figures generally. (The genre, pushed forward by films such as Christopher Hampton’s *Carrington* [1995] and Bill Condon’s *Gods and Monsters* [1998], is a relatively new one, taking off a generation after the works being discussed here.)

That this moment was forsaken tells us something, of course, about attitudes towards identity and society around the time *Tchaikovsky* and *The Music Lovers* were made. It might be wondered why Talankin and Russell were attracted to the subject of Tchaikovsky, and whether there is something to be gained from viewing these films less from a twenty-first century perspective than a Cold War one. The depths of the Cold War, with its ideological opposition between communism and capitalism, East and West, repression and liberalism, might indeed at first seem to offer an explanation for why Talankin and Russell approached the subject of Tchaikovsky almost simultaneously around 1970. The Cold War context of what film historians have called a “struggle for hearts and minds” is certainly not irrelevant when seeking to answer the question, and can be seen to have informed Talankin’s film at the very least (Dunne, 2013; Shaw & Youngblood, 2010). The influence on Russell’s film is less obvious, despite a colourful and implausibly detailed exchange with a Soviet tour guide reported in Joseph Lanza’s study of Russell. This conversation, writes Lanza, happened at the composer’s home in Klin years later, “after his own version [of Tchaikovsky’s life] sparked controversy”. Russell asks provocative questions about Tchaikovsky’s homosexuality and, when the guide seems cagey and disinclined to acknowledge that sexual orientation is relevant to loving the composer’s music, delivers the somewhat stagey riposte: “I love him, but my love isn’t blind.” (Lanza, 2007, pp. 91–92). And so, it might be thought, Western liberalism one, late-Soviet repression nil.

Yet there is a problem with thinking about the films as a study in Cold War antagonism. Quite simply, they do not confront each other as one might expect; neither is a piece of conspicuous ideological warfare. This complements the observation by Tony Shaw and Denise J. Youngblood that the 1970s were a time of relative relaxation within the Cold War, and that during this decade there was a “cleavage” in what until then had been a mirroring of Soviet and Western cinematic propaganda, each predictable in their nightmare visions of the other: “the [Soviet went] to the right, in line with the Brezhnev Doctrine and cinema’s ‘period of stagnation,’ and the [American] to the left, encouraged by the Vietnam and Watergate imbroglios”.¹⁰ To this bifurcation might be added what many scholars have identified as fragmentation within specifically *British* cinematic culture around the early 1970s. This occurred partly because the division of a once predictable audience into many smaller audiences freed directors such as Russell to become more experimental (Harper & Smith, 2012; Sandbrook, 2011). Moreover, as far as Russell held political views, it should hardly surprise us that he was already well to the left and therefore never at risk of crude anti-Communism—after all *The Devils* (1971), made in the immediate aftermath of *The Music Lovers* and censored in both Britain and the United States, could be considered an attack on the hysteria which had fuelled McCarthyism.¹¹

Nor was Talankin’s treatment of a subject who had died in 1893, long before the Russian Revolution, likely to give itself to bristling Soviet rhetoric. *Tchaikovsky* contains no explicit attack on the West. This is almost certainly a reflection of state approval in the early 1970s for the classic and monumental on screen—the Soviet Union’s historic destiny showcased in the proud outlines of a world-class cultural heritage. Not surprisingly, the film was designed for international release.¹² Paris is featured. There is an elaborate sequence, too, involving a sizeable crowd of extras shot at Senate House, the heart of Cambridge University. This is the scene where Tchaikovsky is awarded an honorary doctorate of music. It would be perverse to interpret it as Russia somehow “triumphing” over the West; rather, it suggests pride in Tchaikovsky as a composer of international standing, the implicit concern to compete with the West recognisably of the same order as that which, during the 1960s and 1970s,

led Soviet officials to allow (even compel) some of its greatest musicians to tour the West. The purpose on these tours was to show musicians and audiences how Russian composers *ought* to be played.¹³ And it worked. Time and again Soviet orchestras were invited back to play masterpieces of the Russian musical heritage.¹⁴ Tchaikovsky was a popular composer amongst Western listeners in the 1960s and 1970s, and it is no doubt a reflection of the palatability of Talankin's film to Western audiences (or at any rate to Academy Award selection panels) that it secured a nomination for foreign language film and music at the 1972 Oscars. Therefore, in asserting that *Tchaikovsky* and *The Music Lovers* are not oppositional products of Cold War cinema, and indeed often happen to echo each other's priorities and directorial strategies, I am not suggesting that the Cold War backdrop is irrelevant. After all, in keeping with that strange conflict, the two "sides" often mirrored one another. A comparison of *Tchaikovsky* with *The Music Lovers* extends our understanding of film during the Cold War because each work offers a foil to the other; *Tchaikovsky* recontextualises what Russell liked to believe was a daringly "liberal" approach to the composer (as we shall see, there is plenty of conservatism in *The Music Lovers*), while *The Music Lovers* helps us to see better where *Tchaikovsky* sidesteps such politically inconvenient features as a national hero who was homosexual. By such perhaps unexpected but telling juxtapositions might a contribution to study of film during the Cold War be offered by this piece.

Other important correspondences can be made when considering the films' themes and priorities. Before addressing these, it may be worth elaborating on the conviction just offered about the value of analysing *Tchaikovsky* and *The Music Lovers* in the context of each other. The problem is likely to be seen less as Talankin than Russell. Russell has a reputation as a highly idiosyncratic director, and close comparison of any of his films alongside those by other directors might seem a risky or even redundant enterprise. Yet this takes Russell, and Russell's (partly self-cultivated) reputation perhaps too much at face value. No man is an island—not even one of as tropical a hue as Russell. His first efforts at films about composers, as we have noted, were made under strict BBC guidelines during the 1960s. Thereafter, stylistic continuities between the "respectable" Russell and the "idiosyncratic" Russell can be overlooked; for instance, the way in which he deploys "Land of Hope and Glory" against images of suffering during the First World War in *Elgar* (1962) is only a slightly less ironic touch than his use of the *1812 Overture* (to be discussed later) in *The Music Lovers*, while *The Debussy Film* (1965) clearly signals Russell's sense of himself as a knowing maker of films about composers, comprising as it does a film within a film. (It has two other relevant features: a script from Melvyn Bragg, who would write that for *The Music Lovers*, and the pointed use of a handsome leading man: here, Oliver Reed as the actor/Debussy.) All the while Russell was seeking to move away from the romantic clichés of films such as *A Song to Remember* and *Song Without End*; in other words, his work consciously *avoided* their strategies and mannerisms. And so Russell did not suddenly "arrive" at a point in *The Music Lovers* which defies analysis, either by comparison with his own earlier work or with the work of other directors. Another compelling reason for comparing *The Music Lovers* with *Tchaikovsky* is their shared source material, above all the Tchaikovsky–von Meck letters. For all Russell's idiosyncrasies, it should hardly surprise us that he was closer to Talankin in his view of Tchaikovsky than anybody thinking only of his *stylistic* excesses might contemplate. For the films do indeed share themes and priorities generated by a common subject and some striking similarities across a gulf.

A key shared theme and priority is the films' depiction of a composer working within bourgeois consumerist culture. Peter Gay has traced the emergence in the nineteenth century of a market not just for music but for the *idea* of being a music lover, with the composer elevated to the status of poetic visionary and worldly celebrity at the same time (Gay, 1995, 1998). Tchaikovsky was no exception. Indeed, as his fame grew during the last quarter of the nineteenth century, he was frequently more in demand than other composers: in the 1880s, his services were often acquired by European concert halls as a conductor of his own music (where, one biographer notes, "audiences loved him perhaps more for his celebrity than his skill"); in 1891, he was invited to inaugurate Carnegie Hall in New York; and, as we have seen, he was awarded an honorary doctorate at Cambridge in 1893 (Wiley, 2009; Yoffe, 1986).

Although Tchaikovsky came from a secure background—his father was the director of a sizeable iron works and he was privately educated, with the original intention of entering the civil service—he was not, until his forties, a man of fully independent means. For much of his career Tchaikovsky relied upon patronage, whether from individuals, publishers, concert promoters or fee-paying audiences. Of private patrons, by far the most significant was Nadezhda von Meck (1831–1894), the wealthy widow who acted as Tchaikovsky’s devoted correspondent and supporter between 1876 and 1890. She plays a significant role in understanding the structure, pacing and priorities of *Tchaikovsky* and *The Music Lovers* because both films draw upon historical sources in which the patronage of von Meck is foregrounded. Talankin and Russell turned to biographical accounts influenced by the composer’s 14-year correspondence with von Meck; indeed both films directly quote the letters.¹⁵ The screenplay for Talankin’s film was written by Yuri Nagibin after his short story about the relationship between Tchaikovsky and von Meck (Kohlhase, 1995). It seems likely that two of Nagibin’s principal sources of information would have been Modest Tchaikovsky’s life-and-letters account of his brother from 1900 and the first Soviet edition of correspondence between Tchaikovsky and von Meck published in Moscow between 1934 and 1936.¹⁶ In the wake of this appeared the 1937 book on which Melvyn Bragg drew to script Russell’s film, *Beloved Friend*, translated by Barbara von Meck with further (often seemingly speculative) biographical elaborations from Catherine Drinker Bowen. Thus the films share epistolary roots. This may explain some striking similarities. There is the depiction of von Meck gliding through the composer’s empty rooms on her estate near Brailov, relishing the opportunity to touch some of his belongings without the prosaic reality of him being there. (Or, in Russell’s film, at least awake: in *The Music Lovers* we see von Meck lay next to a sleeping Tchaikovsky on a wide chaise longue, Juliet to his unwitting Romeo, as the music—the height of the love theme, then the funereal close of *Romeo and Juliet*—makes perfectly clear. Talankin is much more discreet and less palpably sexualised, with a completely absent composer. Here, von Meck merely sits at his desk and begins to write a note to him, underlining the epistolary basis of their relationship, while the music—the waltz of the flowers from *The Nutcracker*—is far less amorously charged than *Romeo and Juliet*.) Then there are the fireworks at Brailov, well documented in the Tchaikovsky–von Meck correspondence, when it had been arranged that the composer would be in residence at the same time as his patroness and watch separately fireworks put on in his honour.¹⁷

These scenes at Brailov remind us that Tchaikovsky and von Meck agreed only to be correspondents, never to meet in person. Both films lack a healthy scepticism about this. They allow themselves to be shaped by the words and apparent surface meanings of the correspondence yet are not realistic about an arrangement which suited the two in slightly different ways. There can be no doubt that both derived genuine emotional satisfaction from the highly charged and often confessional nature of the relationship; but on von Meck’s part, there was possibly an element of amorous projection (never meeting may have fuelled rather than hindered this); and on Tchaikovsky’s part there was certainly the need to keep engaged a friend and a patron who was not a composer or a professional musician herself. As Richard Taruskin has argued, at least some of Tchaikovsky’s utterances seem designed to bolster the ideas a music lover might like to have rather than reflecting on musical technique or actual artistic intention. (Which is to say the kind of things the average listener might find a bit dull.) The Fourth Symphony, dedicated to von Meck, is an example of one of the pieces which leads Talankin and particularly Russell astray—perhaps precisely *because* of that exchange of letters between composer and dedicatee. *The Music Lovers* has the composer anxiously delivering the score in person to the door of the von Meck residence, then peering through the window as the lady of the house opens it, all trembling emotion. In the fireworks scene, the opening fanfare—described by Tchaikovsky in his letters to von Meck as “the fateful power of Destiny that rules our life and so often stands in the way of our happiness”—comes to overlay the innocent chirruping of the miniature march from the First Suite to signal the doom of Chilovsky’s jealous revelation to his patroness about the composer’s sexuality. (The fading of Tchaikovsky’s face, etched brightly against the night sky, presages both the end of his relationship with Chilovsky, who glares at the gathering blackness, and the patronage of von Meck: even though, in reality, the latter did not occur for a further decade.) *Tchaikovsky* also has the Fourth Symphony as the soundtrack of doom here.

Rewriting history, Talankin imagines Tchaikovsky as the longed-for guest of honour at the fireworks, yet his empty chair sends von Meck into emotional disarray and signals the beginning of the end of their closeness. Likewise, in *Tchaikovsky*, the climactic end of the first movement is used during Tchaikovsky's ill-fated marriage to Antonina Miliukova, while its doom-laden opening fanfare—the one used by Russell in his fireworks scene—provides the music for the opening credits, as befits a film which will not end happily.

Yet all these references can mislead. Tchaikovsky's explanation of the symphony to its dedicatee as a work about fate may not tell the entire story. As Taruskin points out: "The letter should be read in context: it was written at the express request of the woman who paid Tchaikovsky's bills, and it contains many obvious derivations both from the official program of Berlioz's *Symphonie fantastique* and from the unofficial program of Beethoven's Fifth. ('Fate knocking at the door...')"¹⁸ Tchaikovsky had a strongly developed theatrical sense (and thought himself primarily a composer of the stage rather than the concert hall), yet these films tend to take his words at face value. The reason for this, I believe, may be found in a wish to portray Tchaikovsky as a tragic artist; their motivations may be different, but Talankin and Russell both seek to isolate the composer and (at least on Russell's part) even to subject him to the "ghetto". (The garret is out-of-bounds; von Meck's patronage, lucrative foreign tours and a lifetime pension from Tsar Alexander III in 1888 put paid to that.)

The Tchaikovsky–von Meck correspondence, which ended abruptly in 1890, with the composer dying three years later, gives a tragic shape to the Tchaikovsky story which neither director can resist. More importantly, it furnishes both screenplays with an often pathos-ridden narrative (confessional letters are, after all, rarely without pathos) which can be used to characterise Tchaikovsky in two dimensions: as an artist in society, and as a man in himself. Talankin's Tchaikovsky stands at an often dreamy remove from society. This should hardly surprise us—after all, the makers of this film faced a difficulty with their subject on at least two grounds: that Tchaikovsky was a product of Tsarist not revolutionary Russia, and that his political and social views were highly conservative. Perhaps this is why Innokenty Smoktunovsky, who plays Tchaikovsky (and looks uncannily like him), is so often portrayed as the introspective, other-worldly and above all *un*-worldly composer so often on show in the Tchaikovsky–von Meck correspondence. His childhood home is depicted as grand (almost certainly grander than would have been the case) yet emotionally distant, full of looming expressionist angles in a stark black and white colour scheme; he is abandoned by his bourgeois mother (this abandonment a running theme throughout the film); at concert halls, even as his music is being performed or rehearsed, he hides at the back of the box or slips shyly, surreptitiously, into the scene; several times we see Tchaikovsky in a tavern, oblivious to the revelry around him and hearing (on one occasion actually playing at a piano) the music in his head. There are several slights against history, too. One of the most enjoyable scenes in the film imagines Tchaikovsky, who has been stalking his wife-to-be Antonina, being arrested by the Tsarist police on suspicion of being a terrorist. This is a scene clearly written for the amusement of contemporary Soviet audiences. The police official who interrogates Tchaikovsky is pompous and slow-witted; above his head, so that the cue to smile is not missed, hangs a portrait of Alexander II. (Historically informed viewers would have known that, as it happens, the Tsar would be assassinated by terrorists in 1881. Humour with a kick, then.) Alexander's murder is subsequently discussed in a scene where Tchaikovsky meets the expatriate writer Ivan Turgenev in Paris and they walk by the riverside reflecting on what the future—a future, of course, known to the Soviet authorities—might hold. "How can you unite purity and bloodshed?" ponders Tchaikovsky in response to Turgenev's assertion that "The terrorists have acted only from the highest and purest motives". Turgenev goes on to add, in a speech which conforms to all the requirements of twentieth-century Soviet historical thinking: "Who knows, we may be on the threshold of something important, a threshold you and I might have trouble crossing. But this generation may see something across this threshold that even my writer's imagination cannot fathom". A seed has perhaps been planted in Tchaikovsky's mind. Certainly, this is not too far from the writer who, in 1933, identified Tchaikovsky's music in Marxist terms as having "the manliness to look historical truth in the eye and sing himself and his class a shattering requiem—the *Pathetic Symphony*".¹⁹ Later in Talankin's film, possibly not coincidentally, Tchaikovsky is shown

being carried triumphantly aloft after the success of *The Queen of Spades*. The music we hear is not, however, from the opera but from the Sixth Symphony, the *Pathétique*, and more specifically the third movement march which threatens to spin out of control before the piece's funereal finale—music which in one modern scholar's view is “defiant” and “anti-bourgeois” but also “unthinkable” that it could be considered victorious.²⁰ As if to reinforce that the death of the old order must come before victory, the scene is preceded by imagery of ice floating slowly down a river. Tchaikovsky's march may unwittingly have echoed the march of history—yet victory, as Turgenev hinted, lay in the future.

Where Talankin is able to rescue Tchaikovsky (rescue him, that is, from the point of view of Brezhnev's Soviet Union) he does so by playing up his Russianness and his egalitarianism—and it is Tchaikovsky's nationality, after his status as an artist working within a bourgeois society, which in my view is the second of three powerful forces driving these films. Not surprisingly, even though in Tchaikovsky's lifetime, the greatest stigma he felt himself to be fighting against was his Russianness (a mark to Western audiences of likely absence of refinement), there is a welcome absence in *Tchaikovsky* of the exotic “otherness” (arguably a relic of that nineteenth-century prejudice) which can be found in *The Music Lovers'* treatment of nationality. In *Tchaikovsky*, Russianness is perfectly natural, a matter of pride. In the exchange with Turgenev in Paris Tchaikovsky tells the novelist: “I could never live anywhere but Russia”. (The loveliness with which the Russian countryside is captured in *Tchaikovsky*, landscape being almost a hero in its own right, makes this assertion more compelling.) The clash with Nikolai Rubinstein over the First Piano Concerto generates an even more telling visual, verbal and musical exchange. Rubinstein, who rolls in wearing formal evening dress (a sign of bourgeois complacency), remonstrates with Tchaikovsky that the work is too difficult; Tchaikovsky (who is dressed unassumingly) asserts that ordinary players and listeners should be the judge of that: “My music is written for the people”. Rubinstein storms away and, as Tchaikovsky continues to practise the solo part, from an adjacent room starts loudly to play the solo part of a different piano concerto, Beethoven's *Emperor*—emblem that it was and is of Western musical culture. For a while, East and West thrash it out. (Talankin is sure to have Rubinstein, as in reality, later take everything back about Tchaikovsky's piece.) *Tchaikovsky* is noteworthy, too, for the tender and often humorous depiction of the relationship between Tchaikovsky and his servant Alyosha. Played drolly by Yevgeny Leonov, an actor who specialised in comic anti-hero roles, Alyosha not only looks after Tchaikovsky but looks out for him too. He comforts the composer during a storm; he admonishes him for his drinking and his skulking away from Brailov during the fireworks party; he tries to prevent him from reading bad newspaper reviews; and he discusses Pushkin with him. This is a relationship based on something approaching equality; more significantly, even if the depiction may not be exactly truthful, it is a depiction of a Russian servant who is the salt of the earth.

One of the peculiarities of *Tchaikovsky*, given its pride in the composer's Russianness and its drive to establish him as a world-class artist, is the film's soundtrack. The music is all derived from Tchaikovsky yet it is arranged not just in the way one might expect pre-existing works to be cut to serve a film's visual narrative, but in instrumentation and orchestration too. The man responsible for this was the veteran composer of film scores Dimitri Tiomkin (1894–1979), who also acted as producer on *Tchaikovsky*. This was Tiomkin's last significant involvement in film music. Perhaps his interest in the project reflected ruefulness as well as admiration, for, like many twentieth-century film composers, Tiomkin felt that a career as a “serious” classical musician had somehow eluded him; in youth, he had studied at the St Petersburg Conservatoire under the composer Alexander Glazunov (who had been acquainted with Tchaikovsky) and harboured ambitions to be a concert pianist. The re-orchestrations are, one sometimes suspects, as much Tiomkin's attempt to inhabit Tchaikovsky's skin as a creative artist as they are a purposeful part of the story telling. Christopher Palmer, who knew Tiomkin and who as an undergraduate at Cambridge had witnessed the scene at Senate House being filmed, writes sympathetically of the soundtrack (Palmer, 1984). Certainly, in places, it suggestively supports the film's emphasis on Tchaikovsky's distance from his bourgeois milieu. The waltz from *Eugene Onegin* is used after the dinner at which the newly-wed Tchaikovsky becomes embarrassed and angered by his bride's vacuousness; the growing distortion and

raucousness of the music in Tiomkin's re-orchestration effectively conveys the composer's unsettled frame of mind. Likewise, near the end of *Tchaikovsky*, much is made of music from *The Queen of Spades* where Hermann confronts the Countess for the secret of the cards which will allow him to win at the gambling table. The scene is split between Tchaikovsky imagining the music in his room at night (where he is haunted by a vision of the Countess) and a performance of the opera at which Tchaikovsky is present; if Tchaikovsky is Hermann, who dies for his obsession with gambling and by implication money, then the composer's subsequent demise fits the approved Marxist gloss of Tchaikovsky as victim and prophet of the corruption of pre-revolutionary Russia. (This scene comes soon after the patronage of von Meck has been withdrawn.) All of this is fine. Yet, some of Tiomkin's arrangements seem out of kilter with a "Soviet" take on the story. Indeed, some of the re-orchestrations are sentimental and sugary, the very opposite of what might one expect. For instance, during Tchaikovsky's romance with the singer Désirée Artôt we hear an orchestral arrangement of "December" from *The Seasons*, the modest solo piano part transformed into sweeping strings, sleigh bells and an ecstatic soprano coloratura line. Later, in the imaginary conversation with von Meck about the power of love, passages from *Francesca da Rimini* and the Fifth Symphony are elaborated with a crooning solo violin part which draws increasing (and to my mind increasingly unwelcome) attention to itself.

Tchaikovsky is far from unique in films of composers which take what might seem odd decisions to "help" music fit the storyline. Indeed, both in Western and Soviet cinema, this was an established tradition which benefited from a plethora of talented musicians (often distinguished composers in their own right) who took an interest in lucrative, appealing or politically expedient film work around the middle of the twentieth century—in addition to Tiomkin one might mention Miklós Rózsa (who arranged Rimsky-Korsakov's music for *Song of Scheherazade* and Chopin's for *A Song to Remember*), Max Steiner, Erich Korngold, Sergei Prokofiev and Dmitri Shostakovich. As John C. Tibbetts has argued, the work of composers like Tiomkin and Rózsa in creating pastiches of composers' music injects an element of irony into films about their lives; the very thing which draws many viewers to want to see the film in the first place—the music—becomes "for the most part [relegated] to an extradiegetic role in the narrative discourse" (Tibbetts, 2005c). Tiomkin's work for *Tchaikovsky* fits into this pattern. It also links the film with a tradition of Soviet soundtrack arranging—Leo Arnshtam's *Glinka* (1947), Grigori Roshal's *Mussorgsky* (1950), Grigori Aleksandrov's *The Composer Glinka* (1952) and Roshal's and Gennadi Kazansky's *Rimsky-Korsakov* (1953) had all employed contemporary Russian composers to arrange their soundtracks—which deepens the irony noted by Tibbetts about obscuring a composer's music.²¹ Given the attempts of Talankin and his predecessors to establish their subjects as Russian heroes, this willingness to "re-imagine" their music may seem to modern sensibilities irreverent and even counter-productive. This is not the last of the ironies which attends Tiomkin's soundtrack, because by contrast *The Music Lovers* uses Tchaikovsky's music in an unadulterated (if necessarily chopped up) way, with prestige recordings especially made for the film by the London Symphony under André Previn. No doubt this partly reflects commercial opportunity (an album of music from *The Music Lovers* appeared from United Artists in 1971, just as, incidentally, an album of music from *Tchaikovsky* appeared from Philips in 1972), but it also surely reflects Russell's disdain for the clichés of earlier composer biopics, one of which was their patchwork soundtracks. For whatever reason, of the two films, it is the "patriotic" one which strangely serves Tchaikovsky's music less faithfully.

Russell's view of the place of Tchaikovsky in Russian society is, to a perhaps surprising degree, not so very different from that of Talankin. And this is not simply because both directors draw on the Tchaikovsky–von Meck letters. Rather, Russell seems preoccupied in *The Music Lovers* with showing Tchaikovsky as a victim of his own growing celebrity. This may well be a reflection of the director's view of the artist in society: according to Joseph Lanza, "Russell read bits of himself in Tchaikovsky: the flights of fancy, the temperament, and the striving for artistic integrity against people who can never create and only conspire" (Lanza, 2007, p. 92). Yet this knowingness on Russell's part arguably makes *The Music Lovers* a little more than a composer-versus-society biopic, for Tchaikovsky is shown to be complicit within his own dilemma. As a composer working within a world of patronage,

Tchaikovsky writes the kind of music which brings him the very popularity which, as a reticent man, disturbs him. This (the reticence feasibly apart) was in a way Russell's problem too. He was directing films for audiences who had experienced the consumer boom of the 1960s and had grown familiar with him taking advantage of greater permissiveness on screen. He considered himself a serious artist but knew that he could not help himself when it came to the outlandish touch; after all, it was Russell who offered United Artists the marketing pitch of *The Music Lovers* being about "the marriage of a homosexual to a nymphomaniac". Audience-grabbing nudity was a foregone conclusion—as one contemporary advertising poster put it, "These scenes of raving and hysterical sex are certainly the most daring you have ever seen".²² So much, you might think, for the life and music. In a way, though, the film offers a critique of itself and of its audiences. As Russell explained in a 1972 interview, "*The Music Lovers* was not so much the story of Tchaikovsky as it was a black comedy about the decadence of romanticism ... The core of the film is the destructive force of dreams, particularly on reality. The television adman's trick of passing off his dream as an attainable and desirable reality is to my mind the great tragedy of our age" (Lanza, 2007, pp. 94–95). These remarks may, given Russell's track record for hyperbole, need to be taken with a pinch of salt. However, there is genuine evidence in the film of a critical view of consumerism, and of an attempt to show its ultimately unhappy outcome; for this reason, if none other, Russell's Tchaikovsky needs to meet with tragedy.

Even the title of Russell's film is significant. An early name was *The Lonely Heart* (a reference to a Tchaikovsky song, "None but the lonely heart"), but the full 1970 title as given in the opening credits is "Ken Russell's film on Tchaikovsky and the Music Lovers". This may have been to distinguish it from Talankin's work, but a more compelling reason for calling it *The Music Lovers* would be the way in which attention is drawn to Tchaikovsky's listeners – or, as it might otherwise be put, consumers. Despite the elaborate full name, the film was always known as *The Music Lovers*, and it is striking that this title makes no reference to Tchaikovsky himself. Six scenes in the film go on to focus on these music lovers, and their looking, listening, demands and assumptions. The first, set to images of Tchaikovsky playing the First Piano Concerto at an early private performance, sees his idyll of family bliss appropriated by Antonina's daydream of romance with a cavalry officer, the music's dancing quality reflective of her skittish nature: suddenly she "owns" the music. Later on in this scene, Russell arranges the camera angles so that three women are looking at him in quick succession: his sister Sasha, Antonina and von Meck. The second has von Meck being sent Tatyana's letter scene from *Eugene Onegin* while Antonina writes her letter to Tchaikovsky to the same music: von Meck is given the music (as she is given the Fourth Symphony), just as Antonina inhabits it and will come to cast a spell over Tchaikovsky's mind as a version of his own Tatyana (a girl, that is to say, not to be spurned). The third scene—darkly humorous—sees Tchaikovsky and Antonina married; as they settle to watch an open air performance of *Swan Lake* they are approached by Chilovsky, and, mirroring the music and dancing, a thinly veiled argument ensues over emotional ownership of the composer. In the fourth scene, we see Antonina, now separated from her husband and already in mental decline, boasting to male visitors (there for sex) that she is Tchaikovsky's wife; these visitors she fantasises to be composers who will be impressed by meeting Tchaikovsky's "inspiration". The fifth scene is at the Brailov fireworks, which the composer, whose face is reproduced in huge lights, professes to find embarrassing. It is the sixth and last scene, however, which suggests most fully that *The Music Lovers* contains an attack on a consumerist approach to art. This is perhaps the most garish part of the film. It is set to the end of the *1812 Overture* and begins with most of the characters who have previously "owned" Tchaikovsky—Antonina, von Meck, her sinister twin sons, his former lover Chilovsky, Sasha, Alyosha (how different the two films are in their portrayal of Alyosha!)—firing cannons at him and chasing him along the street, clawing at his clothes. His brother Modest (Kenneth Colley) points triumphantly at the composer. But this turns out to be not the triumph of the pursuers—it is Tchaikovsky's triumph as, through the cannon smoke, a crowd emerges to carry the composer in victory. Modest is now his brother's business manager; he helps Tchaikovsky "conduct" these music lovers into awarding him fame and fortune. The scene ends with Modest lighting cannon fuses to blow off the heads of his brother's pursuers, and with Tchaikovsky being placed on a pedestal, a living monument. As a fantasy sequence this is hardly subtle, yet it seems not intended

to be subtle; there is a hysterical edge to it, and Richard Chamberlain's Tchaikovsky becomes, in the following frame, a snow-covered statue: rather like the scene near the end of Talankin's film where Tchaikovsky is carried aloft after the success of *The Queen of Spades*, there is a clear suggestion that this victory is hollow. Russell would also have known that Tchaikovsky initially did not like his *1812 Overture*—a work, he wrote to von Meck in 1881, composed on commission and “without artistic merit, because I wrote it without warmth and without love”. *The Music Lovers* suggests a mixture of sympathy for and disapproval of Tchaikovsky here; certainly, there is something hypocritical about the sight of the composer exuberantly conducting a line of *can-can* dancers in music he may have thought too commercial as his profit-minded brother capers gleefully in front of them.

If Russell's treatment of the place of Tchaikovsky as a composer in society aligns itself (albeit for different reasons) close to that of Talankin, then his handling of the composer's Russianness is more problematic. In maturity, Tchaikovsky prided himself on appearing, and was often taken to be, a gentleman of refined European manners and dress (Poznansky, 1999). *The Music Lovers* is having none of this. While Chamberlain's performance is subtle, there is little real opportunity for urbanity; instead, the film revels in a sense of the exotic “otherness” of the Russian. No doubt this reflects as much the Cold War lack of familiarity with Russia—and the temptation to condescend—as it does Russell's wish to find in the composer a recklessness which suits his vision of a life which ends tragically. Otherness combines with the film's emphasis on homosexuality (a subject explored further in just a moment) in the very opening scene. Here, we see a mass of snow, accordions, fur hats, vodka and beards, all set to some of Tchaikovsky's most ebullient and seemingly folk-inspired music. The love triangle of Tchaikovsky, Chilovsky and Antonina is set up in this scene, too, with music from the *Manfred* Symphony—this will be a film partly, it seems to declare, about illicit desire. When Tchaikovsky plays the solo part in his First Piano Concerto, he is a dripping, exhausted mess. The family idyll sequence depicts him, again sweating, helping peasants bring in the harvest. (Few things would have been less likely, one cannot help noting.) The flipside of all this innocent earthiness—and proposed as testimony to Tchaikovsky's divided soul—are the interior scenes, full of bold primary colours, wine glasses and beds. Russell's Tchaikovsky has little self-control. Nor do many of his other characters. Glenda Jackson's Antonina is portrayed as sex-obsessed and then mad. Ignoring the possibility that the real Antonina was less problematic than Tchaikovsky's first biographers portrayed her (so anxious were they for his posthumous reputation), Russell charges on with a strong sense of her wildness. He may joke grimly about Antonina declining into insanity, but he associates this, tellingly, with Russianness. Before being committed to an asylum her mother allows Antonina to be prostituted to the anonymous men she believes to be famous Russian composers; the client mistaken as Rimsky-Korsakov, somewhat to his surprise, is heralded with the Sultan's priapic fanfare from the start of *Scheherazade*; Borodin has the sultry accompaniment of that composer's Polovtsian Dances from *Prince Igor*.²³

The last connection I want to explore, and arguably the key factor which pulls together a sense of the composer's place within society and his Russianness in order to give both films a tragic trajectory, is how the films handle Tchaikovsky's homosexuality. It would be easy to suggest that where *Tchaikovsky* studiously avoids the subject, *The Music Lovers* places it centre stage. This in turn might be related to the different production contexts. Talankin censors; Russell sexes. Talankin's film rewrites history in a way which had been going on for at least 40 years in the Soviet Union; Russell's, with a nod to recent liberal legislation, seems at times almost a manifesto for tolerance and pleasure. However, it is not so simple. For, just as the films bear other striking correspondences, so could it be argued that they are not so very different in their depiction of Tchaikovsky's sexuality as a “problem”. The films share an approach to Tchaikovsky's life that is informed by a tradition which pre-dated the Cold War, and which was actually rooted in an international preoccupation at the turn of the twentieth century. This preoccupation was with aesthetics and masculinity, and the anxiety that masculinity could be adversely affected by being excessively “musical” (which is to say, in practice, effeminate). Works such as Richard von Krafft-Ebing's *Psychopathia Sexualis* (1892) pathologised homosexuality in the West during the last years of the nineteenth century, and two years after Tchaikovsky's death the scandal of Oscar Wilde fixed in the public mind a connection between

aestheticism and deviance. (Already, in the very year Tchaikovsky died, 1893, Max Nordau's *Degeneration* had identified Wilde's hedonistic lifestyle as a threat to society.)²⁴ While there is evidence that homosexual practices (despite being illegal) were often more widely tolerated in nineteenth-century Russia than in the West, this was less the case in the twentieth century. Apart from a period after the Russian Revolution during which homosexual practices between men were legalised, they were recriminalized in 1934 and remained illegal until 1993.²⁵ Progress was more rapid in the West, where homosexual acts between consenting males were legalised in England and Wales in 1967. Yet, although this law was passed three years before the release of *The Music Lovers*, it would be rash to assume that *attitudes* had necessarily changed: one law cannot eradicate 80 years of moralising, 80 years of fear. Moralising and fear are aspects of *Tchaikovsky* and *The Music Lovers* which, whether consciously or otherwise, have the effect of obscuring the reality of the composer's life—or, at any rate, to be made to serve as a vehicle for the belief that artists who do not have socially conventional lives are likely to be hysterical/effeminate/doomed. (Delete as applicable; in the case of Russell, delete nothing at all.)

Tchaikovsky achieves the singularly improbable feat of pushing the composer back into the closet. His homosexuality had been known and written about in the Soviet Union during the 1930s, building upon earlier biographical accounts such as that by Modest Tchaikovsky which has been described by one scholar as having “a degree of frankness [which] is remarkable for that time and place” (Tsarist Russia, c.1900) (Brown, 2002). High Stalinism and the requirements of exemplary heroes during the Great Patriotic War put paid to this frankness. By the time that Talankin came to make his film only orthodox sexuality was acceptable. This is why, through wilful misrepresentation of the evidence, Tchaikovsky's private life is not only ignored but recast so that his romance with Désirée Artôt is played up (the relationship is forbidden by Nikolai Rubinstein, jealous on behalf of Russia of Tchaikovsky's creativity being frittered away in matrimony), while his marriage to Antonina is shown to be a failure simply because she is vain and silly, not nearly a match for the great genius whose human judgement might happen to be flawed.

In some ways, *The Music Lovers* is even more mendacious. Its impatience with sexual hypocrisy and intolerance is directed at both the society it depicts and at Tchaikovsky himself (with Christopher Gable's Chilovsky often the mirror-image voice of conscience, urging the composer to avoid being actively dishonest—as James H. Krukones observes, “Tchaikovsky” and “Chilovsky” are not such dissimilar names) (Krukones, 1999, p. 257). This allows elements of implicit homophobia to creep in. It is not just that Russell is determined to have Tchaikovsky die in tragic circumstances. It is, more pervasively, that Russell cannot help envisaging Tchaikovsky in terms of many of those assumptions with which the director would have grown up in the 1940s and 1950s (a time, not coincidentally, when Tchaikovsky's stock in musical criticism was perhaps at its lowest): that homosexuals are effeminate, which means (cue the sexism) given to hysteria, which means unstable, which means unhappy.²⁶ Russell also suffers, as we have seen, from a Western fascination with the “exoticism” of the East, where Russians are naturally rather dissolute and undisciplined—all of this meaning that if Tchaikovsky's sexuality had not done for him then his nationality almost certainly would. Fortunately, perhaps, *The Music Lovers* was made before the appearance and widespread circulation in the 1990s of the theory that Tchaikovsky died not from cholera (both films hold to the cholera view) but from suicide as a result of the threatened exposure of a homosexual liaison.²⁷ Yet Russell is determined to pursue his line on Tchaikovsky's national and sexual otherness. Scenes of wild inspiration alternate with scenes of despair; drunk one moment, Chamberlain's Tchaikovsky is the thin-skinned artist the next. Little is understated. The scene in the railway carriage where the inebriated Tchaikovsky attempts to consummate his marriage to Antonina is set to some of the most anguished music from the *Manfred* and *Pathétique* Symphonies; less disturbing than the sight of Jackson's naked body, rocking on the floor as if in imagined intercourse, is the scene immediately before that when, to downwards-plunging music, she lifts up her hooped dress to create a vertiginous sense of *vagina dentata*. This uses music out of historical context: none of it was composed when Tchaikovsky was first married. But even when the *Pathétique* returns in its proper setting, years later, it is still the music of the doomed homosexual. Although both films acknowledge that Tchaikovsky was in good

spirits when he composed the symphony (“You cannot imagine what bliss it is to be convinced that my time is not yet over and that I am still able to work,” he enthused to a friend) they do so tokenistically, for their directors have decided that he is already close to death. Russell spells it out plainly: seeking a subtitle for the work after its first performance, Modest suggests to his brother, witheringly, “pathetic”. Tchaikovsky accepts it, a fitting testament to his unhappy life. The self-pitying, implicitly sexist judgement here (for who but less than a real man, as the flawed logic goes, would be so self-obsessed?) gets language completely wrong. As Taruskin notes, the Russian sense of *Pateticheskaya simfoniya* means in English something more like “impassioned” than “hopeless”: a red-blooded symphony rather than an effete or moribund one (Taruskin, 2009, p. 80). And yet people will find what they listen for. For those who hear in this music—first performed only a week or so before his death—Tchaikovsky’s requiem, and for those who find compelling the idea of a homosexual life ending in tragedy, this music *must* have direct foreknowledge of the grave. Each man kills the thing he loves, writes Wilde; for Russell, the existence of a sexual nature he may sympathise with but not fully understand means that Tchaikovsky must die. In his discreet way Talankin is little better—oblivion by erasure.

It would be disingenuous to suggest that Tchaikovsky’s life was without unhappy incident, or that he did not, at least in his letters and diaries, often present his anxieties in melodramatic terms. He seems to have been an unusually sensitive man. However, what *Tchaikovsky* and *The Music Lovers* fail to do is see sufficient distance between life and art. Even the apparent criticism in *The Music Lovers* of Tchaikovsky as somebody complicit within a consumerist approach to art underplays his professionalism: his intellectual poise, his meticulous working habits, his lack, though he always hoped for inspiration, of blind faith in it. (Indeed, one of the most regular recriminations he made against his own music was that it is not inspired enough: witness the comment above about the *1812 Overture*.) The films do not convey much sense of Tchaikovsky cleverly transforming the material of experience, imagination and dramatic instinct into music which is often as superbly crafted as it displays many of the paradigms of crowd-pleasing late romantic music. Russell is preoccupied with creativity and the creative act in all of his films about composers but in *The Music Lovers* he is wide of the mark. In dealing with the First Piano Concerto, for example, Russell plays up in his fantasy sequences (barbs against the music lovers watching him and all) the heartfelt spontaneity, almost the naivety of the creative impulse, and takes encouragement from the fact that Nikolai Rubinstein, Tchaikovsky’s mentor at the time, was very critical on initially hearing the piece. (As we have seen, Talankin also made use of this confrontation to make a point about Tchaikovsky’s art being not only spontaneous but *Russian*: music for the people.) Yet, as David Brown comments, Tchaikovsky’s furious account of Rubinstein’s response was given a few years later to von Meck (another example of the problematic nature of the Tchaikovsky–von Meck correspondence?) and as such “was probably heightened” for effect (Brown, 1992). Scholars have shown that work on the concerto was slow and methodical rather than wildly impassioned (a product, mainly, of never having written a piano concerto before); that Tchaikovsky deliberately interwove an audience-pleasing French song and two Ukrainian folksongs into the piece; and that he was likely to have developed musical strategies from Russian composers such as Glinka, Balakirev and Borodin as well as Western examples from Beethoven, Schumann, Chopin and Liszt (Brown, 1992, pp. 20–26; Wiley, 2009, pp. 125–127). All of this is to say that Tchaikovsky’s concerto is the product of a disciplined mind, diligent work habits and resourceful adaptation of earlier and contemporary models. Emotional and emotive, like many of Tchaikovsky’s works, it may be; but that is by design and decision, not by chance or helpless impulse. Later in his composing life Tchaikovsky was more methodical still. When he settled at Klin in 1885 his work routine, observed without deviation while he was there, was to be at his desk between half past nine and one, to walk for two hours on his own while thinking through the morning’s work, and to work again between five and seven. Works of nearly three hours’ duration such as *The Sleeping Beauty* (1888) and *The Queen of Spades* (1890) do not get completed by slouches or those waiting for blind inspiration. Of inspiration, Tchaikovsky remarked: “You cannot simply wait. Inspiration is a guest who does not like visiting those who are lazy” (Brown, 2006). Or, we might add, those who think that daydreaming about gliding in slow motion through forests with a beloved sibling or pretending to be a Russian peasant will get piano concertos written.

This inability to distinguish between life and art is, of course, a recurrent problem in biographical films about creative individuals. It is a particular challenge in pieces about composers because any use of their music in the film almost inescapably invites a programmatic reading: this passage is to do with that event, this tune depicts the composer's wife and so on. But in the case of Tchaikovsky, this inability merges, it could be argued, into a *disinclination* to see any difference between life and art. The opportunities are too tempting: for Talankin a Russian hero doomed by living in the wrong period and a sexuality not to be mentioned, for Russell a pathological case doomed by nationality and homosexuality, and for both, the appeal of a man whose growing worldly success is at variance with private anguish. The popularity of Tchaikovsky's music, in his lifetime and at the time when both films were made, perhaps makes these interpretations a little more enticing. Roland John Wiley has written of the quality in Tchaikovsky's music of what is known in Russian as *prelest'*—a term which might be translated into English as “sheer attractiveness”, with connotations of seductiveness and a deliberate avoidance of the consciously cerebral (Wiley, 2009, pp. xix–xx). It is not difficult to see how a sense of this element of Tchaikovsky's aesthetic—manifest in so many wonderful tunes and delicious touches of orchestration—could be assimilated within readings of the composer's music which resist its “feminine” allure (Jonathan Kemp has rewritten of male heterosexual panic about the body being penetrated: in the case of Tchaikovsky, subtly, through the ears) (Kemp, 2013) and are content to see only its “lack” of Western sophistication. In both instances, what we are talking about is a sexist sense that Tchaikovsky's music is an effeminising danger and that his life was “effeminate” because it was without “masculine” rationality or strength of character.

Usually, this is something headed off in films about composers, especially when their music has a surface appeal or is popularly perceived to have delicate, gentle or doomed characteristics. For example, the casting of the “macho” Cornel Wilde as Chopin in *A Song to Remember* was a deliberate strategy to get around the widely accepted view of the composer as a fragile and weakly individual (Tibbetts, 2005a, p. 86). Likewise, the fated-to-die-young Mozart in Miloš Forman's *Amadeus* (1984) was played by Tom Hulce in an often exuberantly earthy performance; and in the adaptation for screen of Peter Shaffer's play, Hulce, then considered promising Hollywood material, replaced Simon Callow (an openly gay actor) as Mozart despite the critical praise Callow had garnered for playing the role on stage. (In the film, Callow was relegated to the much less prominent role of Emanuel Schikaneder, Mozart's librettist for *The Magic Flute*.)²⁸ Possibly because knowledge of his homosexuality was too well established (even if not officially accepted in the Soviet Union) by 1970, no such attempt to “beef up” Tchaikovsky was made by Talankin or Russell. Yet of the two actors who play the composer in their films—Innokenty Smoktunovsky and Richard Chamberlain—it is, ironically, given Chamberlain's subsequent acknowledgement of his sexuality, the latter whose physical appearance more obviously seems to promise a conventionally “masculine” Tchaikovsky (opportunities to film him shirtless are not missed). Perhaps this is one of Russell's jokes about the deceptiveness of appearances; if so, it is one paid for in the currency of homophobic prejudice. Neither film, but especially not *The Music Lovers*, is prepared to allow any space between dangerously alluring music (which is to say dangerously “feminine” music) and a life of tragedy. Here is a composer who has no manly control over his own destiny, a composer without grip. When we see Tchaikovsky conducting the *Pathétique* Symphony in Talankin's film, or hearing it in Russell's at around the point where he drinks the cholera-infected glass of water, we are encouraged to believe that this is an unhappy man arranging his funeral rites. (Conveniently, we are invited to forget that depressed men tend not to write depressed music: they tend to write nothing at all.) As Taruskin puts it: “The condescending notion that this composer could only relate to his subjects and his tasks on the level of primitive emotional identification ... infantilizes, and caricaturally feminizes, perhaps the most disciplined and sophisticated creative artist nineteenth-century Russia ever produced” (Taruskin, 2009, p. 90).

“Whose Tchaikovsky?”, then, turns out to be something of an irrelevant question. This is partly because neither film considered here requires us to decide; for all Russell's apparent disdain for Talankin's effort, neither *Tchaikovsky* nor *The Music Lovers* sets itself up in conscious opposition—interpretative or ideological—to the other. As we have seen, the films have a number of

correspondences which might at first have seemed unlikely: their narrative reliance on the Tchaikovsky–von Meck correspondence, their portrayal of an artist manoeuvring his way through a consumer society, their exploration of nationality and their discomfort with the subject’s sexuality. Both have considerable merits. The slowness and stiltedness of Talankin’s *Tchaikovsky* have surely been exaggerated; in its own way it is loving, and Smoktunovsky’s urbane, gently melancholic Tchaikovsky is probably closest to the historical reality of the man. Chamberlain for Russell is also winningly committed, however much he finds himself mired in melodrama. *The Music Lovers* presents, too, a rich spectrum of Tchaikovsky’s music, much of it in 1970 less well known to audiences than it is today: we hear lesser known passages from the ballets, *Hamlet*, the Second and Third Symphonies, the *Manfred* Symphony, the orchestral suites and the chamber works. Discovery is made an enticing possibility here.

And yet would viewers have found Tchaikovsky, if they used *The Music Lovers* or *Tchaikovsky* as a guide to the life? My article asks “Whose Tchaikovsky?”, and in doing so, grateful to a borrowed pun,²⁹ I am mindful that both films obscure the reality of the composer’s life in ways which are fascinatingly suggestive of the time in which they were produced. “Whose Tchaikovsky?” can also be read out loud as “Who’s Tchaikovsky?”—who *is* Tchaikovsky? I am not sure that either film quite answers this. This article has contended that, while not antagonistic products of the Cold War, these films show the influence of that conflict—Talankin’s in particular, where the importance of portraying Tchaikovsky as being at once a national hero (“deviant” sexuality erased) and a doomed product of the Tsarist past creates a fascinating tension within that film. Russell, too, seems intent on exploiting the possibilities of “Western” permissiveness, though his film has a sharp moral about the dangers of consumerism and, as we have noted, fails to break free from an underlying conservatism when it deals with Tchaikovsky’s sexuality. Russell’s film is clearly a product of time and place, but, in keeping with his idiosyncratic approach to authority, far less obviously conformist to Western ideology than Talankin’s is to Soviet ideology. The degree of conformity to Cold War ideology hardly matters; the result in both cases reveals as much about production context as it does about Tchaikovsky as a “difficult” subject.

Too much of Tchaikovsky is made to disappear as a consequence of decisions and assumptions made in surprisingly—given the difference and distance between the directors—similar ways about how to stage this particular nineteenth-century life. If the films constitute a flawed representation of Tchaikovsky’s life, as many biopics are problematic in relation to their subjects, what they do shed light on is the importance of Tchaikovsky as a case study in “otherness”. Before *Tchaikovsky* and *The Music Lovers* audiences had had relatively limited experience (especially in the West) of Russian composers’ lives being staged on screen, and of Tchaikovsky’s specifically. The Soviet Union being too wrapped up in mythologizing its own past along state-decreed lines, and the West (or at least Russell) being too early in its assimilation of sexual liberation, the opportunity to do justice to a great composer who just happened to be gay was lost, lack of ease passed off under cover of assumptions about both his role in society as an audience-pleasing composer and his nationality. Put this way, it should be emphasised that, even with the Cold War backdrop, these films fall into a particular trap—a cross-cultural, international trap as it were—because of their choice of subject. In the Soviet Union evidence of “deviant” sexuality in national heroes was wilfully suppressed, just as a sense of Tchaikovsky’s deliberate and sophisticated cultivation of a bourgeois audience was politically inconvenient. (Had it been a proletarian audience there would have been no problem: but members of the proletariat and peasants did not attend Tchaikovsky’s concerts or play piano arrangements of his works at home after supper.) In the West, “deviant” sexuality had been newly acknowledged, but still in essentially condescending and sexist ways, the assumption being that Tchaikovsky’s “crowd-pleasingness” and “seductiveness” was the outpouring of an individual who lacked “masculine” control over his emotions. All of the erasures in *Tchaikovsky* and *The Music Lovers* reveal much not only about the production context of these films but about a specific biographical tradition as well. And if this seems a judgement on the past then it is a judgement on the present too: for the great biopic of Tchaikovsky, the one which makes nothing disappear, has yet to be made.

Dedication

This article is for my godchildren Franklin, Ava, Ella and Liberty, hoping that they might come to enjoy exploring the question in the title.

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Cover image

Source: Emma Bushell.

Notes

1. To my knowledge, only one chapter in a book has begun to offer any comparison between Talankin's *Tchaikovsky* and Russell's *The Music Lovers* (Krukones, 1999). I deliberately held off reading this piece until after I had completed this article, but am appreciative of the opportunity subsequently to add a few nuances.
2. *Independent obituary*, 27 October 2010, Lanza (2007), Simon Callow's foreword to Tibbetts (2005a).
3. Matters are further complicated by Visconti having re-envisioned the novelist Aschenbach of Thomas Mann's novella as a composer and in doing so, and using in the film Mahler's music, arguably creates an association in the susceptible viewer's mind between Mahler and the moribund.
4. For a sense of context between the 1930s and early 1950s see Bartig (2013).
5. An earlier Soviet film of the composer's life, less tentative than Aleksandrov's, had already been made: Leo Arnshtam's *Glinka* (1947) (Frolova-Warner, 2007).
6. Reviewing Aleksandrov's film on 11 May 1953, the critic “H.H.T.” in the *New York Times* was able to muster more enthusiasm for this than for *Glinka*, the 1947 Soviet biopic directed by Leo Arnshtam (a “tuneful bore”), but the enthusiasm was somewhat guarded: “some serious flaws” though “the best of its kind yet to emerge from behind the Iron Curtain”.
7. For a robust rebuttal of this still problematic tendency see Taruskin (1997).
8. This is a fate spared other composers within the Russell oeuvre. If Gustav Mahler in his 1974 film is highly wrought and doomed then this is because after the diagnosis of the composer's heart condition he was knowingly living on borrowed time; in other words, it was less directorial imposition than historical reality.
9. There is discussion of a new film being made in Russia which might “erase” his homosexuality: Luhn (2013).
10. Shaw and Youngblood (2010, p. 10). The Brezhnev Doctrine was an enforced commitment to Communist solidarity in the wake of the attempted 1968 uprising in Prague: in cultural terms, a reactionary shift towards conservatism.
11. “My most, indeed my only, political film,” Mark Kermode quotes Russell as saying in his introductory note to the fully restored 2012 BFI edition of *The Devils*, BFI VD940.
12. The arrangements for release with Warner are briefly touched upon in Liehm and Liehm (1977). Clearly, the film made it to the West, even if its American backers pulled out: see Krukones (1999, p. 251).
13. The most celebrated example of this is the recording of Tchaikovsky's Fourth, Fifth and Sixth symphonies made by the Leningrad Philharmonic while on a Western tour in 1960, the recording locations London and Vienna. In 1974, Robert Layton wrote in *Gramophone* of these recordings, conducted by Yevgeny Mravinsky: “Turning to the Mravinsky performances one is in another world” and “These performances radiate a tremendous power, a sense of truth and authenticity of experience”. Note the Western emphasis on the performers' out-of-the-ordinary ability to know and realise Tchaikovsky's musical intentions.
14. During the 12 concerts given by three Soviet orchestras at the London Promenade concerts between 1966 and 1971, 39 pieces were played, and of these 28 were by Russian/Soviet composers, with 10 (over a quarter) being significant Tchaikovsky scores. The three residencies were those by the Moscow Radio Symphony (1966), the USSR State Symphony (1968) and the Leningrad Philharmonic (1971). Figures calculated from www.bbc.co.uk/proms/archive (accessed 9 April 2014).
15. The quotations are numerous in *The Music Lovers*. In *Tchaikovsky* the letter from Tchaikovsky to Meck of February 1878 about his “knowledge” of love is quoted in the fantasy sequence where Tchaikovsky imagines himself talking to von Meck during a railway journey.
16. I am grateful to Brett Langston of tchaikovsky-research.net (e-mail exchanges of 13 April and 4 May 2014) for advising me on likely sources of information for Talankin's film. Langston comments that the most widely available biography in the Soviet Union in the 1960s was Arnold Alshvang's *P.I. Tchaikovsky* (1959), and that “Alshvang would certainly have read the Tchaikovsky-von Meck correspondence and would have drawn on it as one of the historical sources he used in compiling his biography”. However, he adds that Alshvang, in keeping with the hagiographic manner of Soviet biographers c.1960, makes less direct reference to the correspondence than does Modest Tchaikovsky in *The Life of Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky* (1900–1902). Like his brother, modest was homosexual, and this may have encouraged him to take a more sympathetically revelatory attitude towards Tchaikovsky's private life than might otherwise have been the case in Tsarist Russia c.1900.
17. Tchaikovsky wrote to von Meck: “I found it surprisingly pleasant to be so near to you and yours, and to hear the voices and, as far as my eyesight allowed, to see you, my dear friend”. Von Meck responded: “How grateful I am to you, and how dear you are to me!” Quoted in Poznansky (1993).
18. Richard Taruskin. “Tchaikovsky the symphonist”, liner notes to Mikhail Pletnev's 1996 recording of the complete symphonies with the Russian National Orchestra, Deutsche Grammophon, 449 967-2.
19. Boleslaw Przybyszewski, “Tchaikovsky: the composer and his age”, quoted in Taruskin (2009).
20. Jackson (1999). Jackson's reading is part of a homoerotic reading of the work, but his emphasis on the “anti-bourgeois” and fundamentally self-destructive nature of the march bears significant resemblance to Przybyszewski's class-based interpretation.

21. Egorova (1997) and Bartig (2013, pp. 166–167). Vissarion Shebalin arranged the music for *Glinka*; Dmitri Kabalevsky the music for *Mussorgsky*; the task for *The Composer Glinka* was offered first to Dmitri Shostakovich, then Yuri Shaporin, then Sergei Prokofiev, before finally settling on Vladimir Shcherbachov and Shebalin again; Georgy Sviridov arranged the music for *Rimsky-Korsakov*.
22. Reproduced on a blog by Mark Tompkins: see www.thesamecinemaevernight.net/the-music-lovers-a-tchaikovsky-biopic-thats-pathétique (accessed 18 May 2014).
23. At around the same time, 1971, James Bidgood was using music from Mussorgsky's *Night on the Bare Mountain* as a motif in his underground homoerotic film *Pink Narcissus*.
24. Weeks (1990) and Sinfield (1994). Sinfield notes (140, 145) that Tchaikovsky's homosexuality was sufficiently well known in the West as early as 1914 for E.M. Forster to have a character in his novel *Maurice* use the waltz from the *Pathétique* Symphony as an "indicator" of homosexuality.
25. Healey (2001). Healey's book is a rich source of information, too, on the homosexual subculture of late Tsarist Russia, and Tchaikovsky's part in it. Healey is at one with scholars such as Poznansky who argues that the composer was not only fully conversant with the codes and practices of homosexual activity but sufficiently at ease with this aspect of himself not, as some would have it, to have committed suicide. See 30, 41, 93, 278 (n. 43 and n. 50), 267 (n. 12).
26. On Tchaikovsky criticism of the 1940s and 1950s, see Brown, "Tchaikovsky and Anglo-American criticism". On the conservatism of Western morals in the same period see David (1997).
27. Even had Russell had access to the suicide theory, it would have made more problematic the opportunity to make *The Music Lovers* symmetrical: the dying composer's boiling bath, designed to try to stimulate failing kidneys in cholera cases, clearly echoes the boiling bath given to his mother when she is dying from the same disease early in the film. Talankin, too, albeit without the melodrama, returns us to the young, hyper-sensitive composer at the end of his film.
28. Callow notes, too, the tendency of audiences and critics to pick up more the "rude" aspects of Mozart: Good or bad, every review of my performance in *Amadeus* reviewed the first act—the giggling, the prancing, the dirty-talk. No mention was made of the striking speech in which Mozart spoke of music, in which his deep seriousness was suddenly revealed' Callow, (2004, p. 195).
29. McBurney (2004). One notes, too, that Tibbetts plays upon the pun in "Whose Chopin?".
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