

Tchaikovsky

The Man Behind the Music

PROLOGUE • A PROLEPSIS

Tchaikovsky reflects on the timeline of his life. He is frequently visited by the guiding spirit of his deceased mother, who taught him to play the piano and gave him his voice through music. He is also visited by the innocent spirit of his child-self, free of the societal pressures of his time. The memory of who he was no longer aligns with who he is, thus leaving a hollow disconnect between the life he has and the love he longs to pursue...

ACT I

THE HOME OF LEO TOLSTOY

Tchaikovsky is well-received at a societal event celebrating the life and work of writer Alexander Pushkin, held at the home of acclaimed author Leo Tolstoy. Tolstoy directs the crowd's attention to the entertainment of the evening: a violin quartet led by a dashing, young violinist by the name of Josef Kotek. Tchaikovsky and Kotek are irrevocably drawn to one another from that moment on. Tchaikovsky hands a business card to Kotek, asking him to help orchestrate the score for his next violin concerto.

TCHAIKOVSKY'S STUDY

Kotek arrives at Tchaikovsky's study, where they begin composing a violin concerto. While playing together, Kotek pauses to contemplate Tchaikovsky's score in a moment of sheer adoration. The connection between the two musicians is undeniable, yet the consequences of pursuing such a forbidden relationship deter them. Before leaving, Kotek gives Tchaikovsky his personal handkerchief as a reverent token of their meeting.

THE OPERA

The aristocracy gathers at the theater to hear famed soprano Madame Désirée Artôt. Tchaikovsky goes to Kotek, perhaps too resolutely. The magnetism between the two artists sparks gossip among the guests. Kotek swiftly retreats to avoid compromising Tchaikovsky's public esteem. Noticing the strain, Tchaikovsky takes measures to shift the focus. Mesmerized by Mme Artôt's voice and stage presence, Tchaikovsky invites her to dance after the opera. Kotek observes the two in jealous opposition. When the guests notice that Tchaikovsky has taken an interest in Mme Artôt, the atmosphere in the room changes from one of dangerous suspicion to welcomed respite.

A DACHA IN THE URAL MOUNTAINS

Tchaikovsky and Mme Artôt retreat to a private residence to spend time alone together. The two dance, engrossed in a beautiful and tender duet,

yet Tchaikovsky feels no passion. Each time their dancing intensifies to the point of intimacy, he shies away from the moment. Disappointed, Mme Artôt withdraws, leaving Tchaikovsky alone. Companionless, Tchaikovsky ponders his future. As time passes, Mme Artôt marries, while his relationship with Kotek remains at an impasse.

INTERMISSION

ACT II

THE MOSCOW CONSERVATORY

Classes have finished for the day at the Moscow Conservatory, and all the music and ballet students gather in the garden to enjoy the spring weather. Among them is Antonina Miliukova, a longtime student of Tchaikovsky's. Antonina's passionate glances toward Tchaikovsky are evidence that she is in love with him. Yet, to her dismay, he barely notices her. Later, Antonina is in her dorm room, imagining her life with Tchaikovsky. She writes of her devotion to him and offers herself as his bride, entrusting a friend to deliver her letter to Tchaikovsky. Upon reading her letter, Tchaikovsky is once again conflicted. He does not love Antonina, yet she presents him with the perfect opportunity to comply with the societal pressures of his time. As he contemplates his choices, Antonina arrives, declares her love for him, and insists that he marry her. He now must make the defining choice of his life: to conform to popular expectation or to live his personal truth. He accepts Antonina's proposal but explains to that while he will marry her, he will never act as a husband to her.

THE MARRIAGE

Tchaikovsky and Antonina are married with Kotek mournfully playing for the wedding. After the wedding celebration, the couple retires to their home where Antonina attempts to seduce her new husband. He rejects her advances and is once again left alone in despair. The composition of Tchaikovsky's life dances through his mind. Each page in the score is represented by the characters in his life: mother, a young Tchaikovsky, Mme Artôt, Antonina and Kotek.

JUDGMENT & REPOSE

As he sits alone, Tchaikovsky imagines a "court of honor" is convened to pass judgment on the choices he has made throughout his life regarding his relationships. Vilifying gavels are brandished by the masked figures passing before him. A reflection of his life, his last dance is a mixture of resignation and reconciliation tinged with the bitter sweetness of unrequited love. Tchaikovsky collapses under the weight of his unlived life. His mother and child-self return to him, signifying the end.