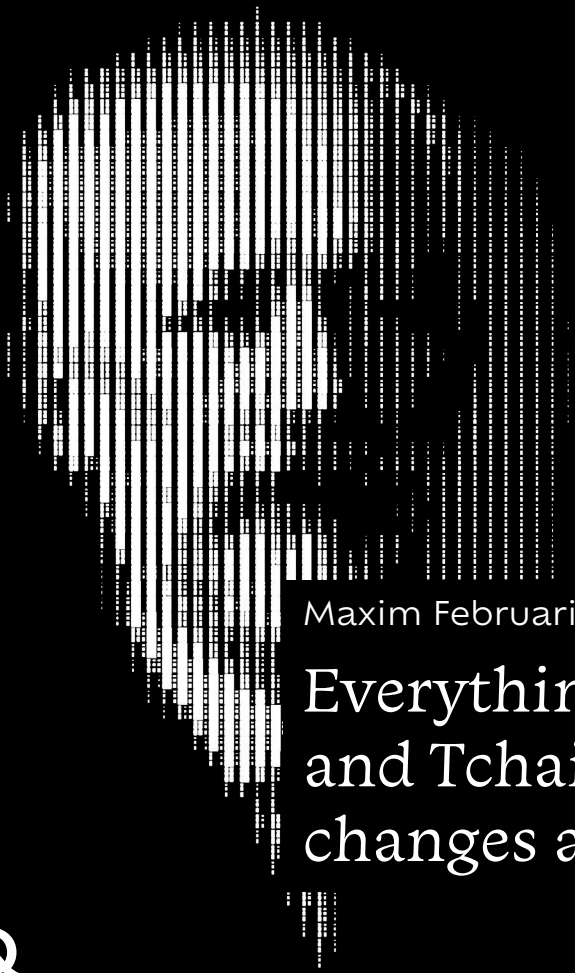

Maxim Februari

Everything changes and Tchaikovsky changes along with it

Colophon

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This essay on Tchaikovsky is a gift from the **Friends of the Dudok Quartet Amsterdam**.

In this exclusive essay, writer, lawyer and philosopher **Maxim Februari** offers a profound insight into the meaning of Tchaikovsky's music at the request of the Dudok Quartet. The essay is intended for attendees of our concerts.

The challenge as we prepare each program is to find answers to the questions 'What is the true nature of this music and what worlds can we unveil behind the score?' This quest is our main incentive to delve further into the music. Without losing sight of our rich string quartet tradition, we always search for new formats and new perspectives.

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Everything changes and Tchaikovsky changes along with it

English translation by Andy Brown

There's the Tsarist Tchaikovsky, the Soviet Tchaikovsky, the nationalist and the bourgeois Tchaikovsky, there's the Tchaikovsky of the biographers, the Tchaikovsky of the musicologists, right up to a thoroughly modern LHBT Tchaikovsky; and in among this overwhelming abundance of temporary Tchaikovsky's, there's the Dudok Quartet Amsterdam, sitting in a rehearsal room to say something that is musically sincere. Something real.

The quartet studies the score intently.
Actually, Tchaikovsky is a kind of meta-Mozart, it mumbles.
– What? Asks the visitor cautiously.
Hm, the quartet replies.

The link between the two composers is that Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart simply didn't want to be too pompous, while Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky really very explicitly didn't want to be too pompous. The man wrote for the

public, not for the museum, and that's where his work gets its elegance, its emotional proximity and its tension, and its sometimes astounding agreeability. Listen to the slow sections of the string quartets, their melodiousness and almost ostentatious simplicity. All very open and welcoming.

On the other hand, the pieces called for a great deal of technique and hard work.

In his book *On Russian Music*, musicologist Richard Taruskin says that Tchaikovsky may well be the most disciplined and sophisticated artist that nineteenth-century Russia produced.

At the end of the twentieth century, a biographer took the bold step of linking Tchaikovsky's homosexuality to the expressive currents in his work, as in the slow sections of the string quartets. As if the composer consisted entirely of feelings.

Such a suggestion, writes Richard Taruskin, the claim that everything in the music is about emotional identification, is a condescending and infantilizing caricature of homosexuality and of this precisely constructed work. The composer thought very deeply about the whole thing.

In any case, this is what the Dudok Quartet finds itself up against. A solid nineteenth-century body of work, a twentieth-century tradition of performance with many pompous prejudices and as yet unspecified twenty-first century forms of musical practice.

That poses tough questions for the quartet about its approach to Tchaikovsky. What can be done to perform his work in an original and honest

way in these times? How do you bring lightness to his gravity and give weight to his lightness?

'How do you deal with the fact that life is elusive?' asks the first violinist. 'Up bow or down bow?'

What is authentic?

Amateurs

In the nineteenth century, the world opened up. Electric lights went on in the cities. Around the time of Tchaikovsky's birth in 1840, railway lines were laid, enabling people to travel. A decade before his death in 1893, telephone networks came into operation and people could suddenly call each other all over the place.

When director Kirill Serebrennikov brought out a film about Antonina Miliukova, Tchaikovsky's wife, he referred in interviews to the great technological revolutions that enabled people to move around much more quickly and see more of the world than ever before.

That also applied to the composer himself, he said. 'I was for example enormously delighted to discover that Tchaikovsky had climbed the Empire State Building.' In 1891, the composer crossed the Atlantic by ship for a two-week visit to America, to open the brand-new Carnegie Hall with a performance of his *Marche Solennelle*.

We do not know whether all these innovations – the telephone, the train and the steam machine – had any influence on Tchaikovsky's work, says Serebrennikov, but it is interesting to think about their impact on

the music of the times. This is not, by the way, the subject of his film, he hastens to add. That is about Nina Miliukova's disastrous marriage to Tchaikovsky.

Yes, but still, you may think, as a naive Tchaikovsky-watcher. You could even claim that that marriage between Nina and Pyotr Ilyich was a disaster because of the technological revolutions of the nineteenth century. Because a blossoming world and faster communication brought with them the modern persona of the music lover, the amateur, the fan. According to historian Peter Gay, music lovers in the nineteenth century did not in the first place love music but were mostly enchanted by the artistic and romantic idea of being a real music lover.

From this perspective, it is no coincidence that Ken Russell's renowned film about Tchaikovsky is called 'The Music Lovers': a cult had evolved around the composer, and everyone wanted to touch him, be touched by him, worship him and be a part of his fame and stardom. Carnegie Hall did not choose to have the celebrity Tchaikovsky conduct the work of the composer Tchaikovsky without good reason. The man was a phenomenon.

So, with a little imagination, you can see the relationship between Nina and Pyotr Ilyich as a consequence of the music cult of the time: he was the famous artist, she the admirer. That is why she wanted to marry him. It wasn't such a great idea, as he wasn't interested in her sexually. The marriage hit the rocks in no time, and Antonina Miliukova lost her mind.

So much for the story of the modern nineteenth century and its music lovers.

What does this mean for twenty-first century musical practice? Perhaps, above all, it means that technological innovations also bring about changes in the arts – and that you cannot predict in advance what those changes will be.

In our own century, the era of innovations like streaming en sharing, contemporary musicians must find new ways to connect with the classical music audience. And you can see them all trying very hard to do that.

They want to be rid of the cult image. They walk through the hall during concerts, say in interviews that they no longer want to wear gala dresses on stage, get very irritated by the formal concert hall etiquette, want to make classical music less strait-laced, no longer want to marry music lovers, they want music to be inclusive, not exclusive. We are not a mausoleum, they say in interviews, we are a living playground.

It is in this context that the Dudok Quartet is not only thinking deeply about the score, but also about the times.

Nation

On 6 March 1953, at 5 o'clock in the morning, the telephone rings at the home of Rostislav Dubinsky, first violinist of the Borodin Quartet.

Second violinist Yaroslav Alexandrov is on the line.

'You know why I'm calling so early…'

'Has the inevitable occurred?'

'Yes. Vice Minister Kholodilin himself called me; they need a quartet.'

The Borodin Quartet is expected in all haste. Joseph Stalin has died.

Five minutes later, Yaroslav Alexandrov calls again. They have to drop by the Composers' House on the way. Why?

'Oh, you don't know yet. . . . Prokofiev also died. At the same time.'

'What a nightmare.'

'Kholodilin said to bring Tchaikovsky.'

'For whom?'

'Both.'

In the Soviet era, you simply always play Tchaikovsky, at every public occasion, even the death of Sergei Prokofiev, who was certainly no fan. The Borodin Quartet tries lovingly to protect the late Prokofiev against the Tchaikovsky-mania.

'We also have Beethoven', they suggest cautiously.

'Tchaikovsky is good', says the vice minister.

And that is an end to it.

Rotislav Dubinski described the events surrounding Stalin's death many decades later, in 1989, in the *New York Times Magazine*. He relates with verve how the musicians are given nothing to eat for days; they live and breathe Tchaikovsky.

On 6 March, David Oistrach plays the *Serenade Melancolique* beside Stalin's coffin, after which the Borodin Quartet play the Second String Quartet, and then Oistrach, Lev Oborin and Sviatoslav Knushevitsky play the first part of the piano trio, and then it is again the turn of the quartet.

That night, the members of the quartet sleep in their dress suits in the concert hall, and the following day, they play the slow part of the string

quartet again. And on the third day, they play Tchaikovsky again for the whole day without food.

Well, yes, Tchaikovsky… Tchaikovsky… says musicologist Arkady Klimovitsky in an interview with *De Groene Amsterdammer* at the beginning of this century. 'Tchaikovsky was played at every funeral, reception and ceremonial opening. But it wasn't Tchaikovsky at all, it was a cheap Soviet imitation.' Lift music. Musical wallpaper. You didn't even hear it any more. 'Just as Catharine the Great forced us to eat potatoes, the Soviets forced their music down our throats.'

There was no room at all for freedom of interpretation; under the dictatorial regime, musicians could not decide for themselves how they wanted to play the music. The tempo and dynamics were determined by the party bosses.

Dubinski describes how David Oistrach, standing next to Stalin's coffin, even received instructions from Soviet ideologist Michail Suslov as he was playing. Oistrach leaned forward, Suslov whispered something in his ear and Oistrach continued playing, but now suddenly with no emotion. 'His playing became quicker, lighter and less expressive', says Dubinski.

All in all there was so little vitality and musicality in this Soviet-Russian Tchaikovsky that eventually there was no fun left in it at all; when that era came to an end, the composer had to be completely rediscovered and freshened up. There were new regimes, with new interests, and new biographies, with new interpretations.

New opinions were voiced about the relationship between Russia and the internationally acclaimed musical genius.

At the end of 2022, the Petro Tchaikovsky National Music Academy of Ukraine decided that, despite objections, they would not remove the great composer from their name. After the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2021, there were calls to give the conservatorium in Kyiv a new name and scrap that of Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky, the Russian.

But others rejected these demands, recalling Tchaikovsky's personal involvement in the establishment of the Ukrainian conservatorium. And his maternal great-grandfather, who was a French sculptor. And his paternal great-grandfather who was a Zaporozhian Cossack.

Ukrainian singer-songwriter Yuri Rybchinsky, member of the conservatorium's supervisory board, has said that no single country can lay claim to the composer: 'Tchaikovsky, like Shakespeare, like Joan of Arc, like Christ, does not belong to a single nation, he belongs to the whole world.'

Depths

Months pass and the Dudoks are still staring at the music on their tablets. At the long lines in the cello part; at the relationship between the four voices.

'Brahms would never have done it like that.'
They consider it.
'Would you say that the escalation starts here, in this bar?'
What exactly was their definition of escalation again?
The quartet thinks about it.

The deepest meaning of the music on the tablets depends on so many factors. On Tchaikovsky of course. But also on the quartet itself. In an article in music magazine *The Strad*, the members of the quartet wrote that the meaning of 'old music' only comes to the fore 'in the interpretation of the performer'. They need to be fully aware of who they are themselves to know how to give new meaning to the old.

What's more, once the audience are sitting in the concert hall, the meaning also depends on them. After all, they bring their own personalities and musical attitudes to the performance.

And here you have it, straight off, the new relations in the concert hall: worship of the musicians is passé, everyone now has their own role to play, including the audience. So you have to hope that they, too, will do their best to give Tchaikovsky a new meaning.

For now, the fascination of the public outside the concert hall is still focused on the man. Memes do the rounds; pictures of cups of coffee – 'TchaiCoffee' – with a portrait of Pyotr Ilyich in the froth. An American tea shop sells a box with twenty bags of chai tea with the name ChaiKovsky in its assortment of LHBQTeas. For the same price, by the way, you can buy Freddy Mercury teabags tasting of Bohemian Raspberry. Only the high and mighty are worthy of such an honour.

And Tchaikovsky is undeniably a great name in the tea shop's special category: he tops every list of world famous homosexual composers. His love life is the subject of political discussions and interviews with heads of government. If the public is not careful, Tchaikovsky is in danger of becoming just as confined in his sexuality as in his nationality.

The Dudok Quartet is still in the rehearsal room with the imposing number of temporary Tchaikovskys and with music that probes the eternal depths of the human soul. Music that expresses feelings of sorrow and joy that would otherwise never be expressed and moments of despair and hope that everyone recognizes. Music that expresses universal experiences, according to the connoisseurs.

Like the audience later in the concert hall, the quartet has to reconcile these temporalities and eternities, give gravity to the lightness and bring lightness to the gravity. And all that preferably without being too pretentious. That's quite a task.

For the hundred-thousandth time, the members of the quartet play the same bar, reflecting, grumbling, testing, and then suddenly, elated.
'Yes, let's do it like that,' they say, satisfied. 'It is Tchaikovsky, after all.'
And, yes, they are right.
It is, after all, Tchaikovsky.

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Maxim Februari

Maxim Februari is a Dutch novelist, columnist and legal philosopher. He is an inevitable voice in the social debate. Since his 1989 literary debut - with the novel De zonen van het uitzicht, awarded with the Multatuli Prize - he published several acclaimed novels and collections of essays.
In 2020 his work was awarded with the prestigious P. C. Hooft Prize. He is a member of the Academy of Arts.

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