

Opera sheds new light on Tchaikovsky's gay lifestyle

Tchaikovsky is thought of as a gloomy fatalist, but a rarely staged humorous opera and a book about his gay lifestyle will make us think again

By Jessica Duchen

Thursday, 12 November 2009

An opera by Tchaikovsky? It must be about Fate, with a capital F. Duels in the frosty dawn, blood on the snow. A fragile, innocent heroine, doomed love, incipient madness. Tchaikovsky: the ultimate gloomy Russian bastard. You can hear it in his music, can't you?

So run the tired old clichés. But a new Christmas treat is promising to reveal a side of Piotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky that we've more or less ignored until now – perhaps partly because it doesn't fit that ingrained yet one-sided view. The Royal Opera is staging *The Tsarina's Slippers*, a fairytale opera that has never before been heard at Covent Garden. The story is by Gogol: it tells of a blacksmith who rides on the Devil's back to St Petersburg to seek a pair of leather slippers worn by the Tsarina with which to woo the girl he loves. Tchaikovsky himself considered the music almost perfect. Francesca Zambello's production promises fantasy, ballet, glitter and a bevy of leading Russian opera stars. No wonder it is nearly sold out. Where has *The Tsarina's Slippers* been all our lives?

The appreciation of Tchaikovsky in the West has been hampered by a variety of factors, including an obvious language barrier and the Iron Curtain itself. Two thorny issues dominate our consideration of him, overshadowing all else: first, his homosexuality; then his death from cholera, thought to have been an elaborately coerced and concealed suicide. These have been dressed up in a range of books and films that each add another layer to the mystery, often reinforcing the notion of the tortured, self-tormenting genius.

Now, though, a breath of fresh air is sweeping through a re-evaluation of Tchaikovsky. A new biography by Roland John Wiley was published this autumn and ecstatically reviewed in these pages by Michael Church; it claims that some of those mysteries are no more than myths. For instance, Wiley points out that Tchaikovsky was openly gay all

his life, to the point that he feminised the names of the young men he consorted with, and indeed his own – signing a letter to his brother (who was also gay) "Petrolina". The imperial court, the book implies, appears to have taken such matters rather in its stride.

That's not to say that Tchaikovsky did not suffer to some extent over his sexuality and unfulfilled passions, such as his love for his own teenaged nephew. "Cursed buggermania forms an impassable gulf between me and most people," he wrote to his brother, in a formerly unquoted letter cited by Wiley. "It imparts to my character an estrangement, fear of people, shyness, immoderate bashfulness, mistrust, in a word, a thousand traits from which I am getting ever more unsociable. Imagine that often, and for hours at a time, I think about a monastery or something of the kind."

He attempted to "cure" himself in 1877 by marrying a young student, Antonina Milyukova, who had declared her love to him by letter, reminding him of Tatiana, the heroine of his opera Eugene Onegin. It was a disaster: he fled in a state of near breakdown nine weeks later.

Visiting Paris the year before, he had heard Bizet's opera Carmen, which made an indelible impression on him – notably its fate motif, a concept he adopted in his Fourth and Fifth Symphonies to blazing effect. Did he feel himself bound by fate to a terrible, inevitable end, like Carmen? That is suggested all too strongly in his sixth and last symphony, the Pathétique, which ends in an evocation of despair unequalled anywhere in the classical repertoire.

No wonder the notion of Tchaikovsky as a fun-loving creator of comedies is somewhat alien to us. Ken Russell's movie *The Music Lovers* beamed the tale of the psychologically tortured, fatalistic homosexual loud and clear to a whole new audience. Wiley is probably the first of his many biographers to admit that we may never know the truth about his death. The myths have become self-perpetuating; anything that doesn't quite fit the image is excised from our musical experience.

Why else do orchestras programme the fate-laden Symphonies No. 4 and 5 and the devastating No. 6 to the exclusion of his first three? There's the exquisitely beautiful No. 1, "Winter Dreams", full of characteristically Russian melody and soulfulness; the second, the "Little Russian", concise and high-spirited; and the lavish, balletic No. 3, nicknamed the "Polish" for its magnificent final Polonaise. His orchestral suites are hardly ever performed – but the Suite No. 3, a symphony in all but name, is a masterpiece from start to finish, closing with an extended and often very entertaining set of character variations.

Nor is *The Tsarina's Slippers* the only Tchaikovsky opera neglected in the West. When do we ever hear *The Voyevoda*? *The Oprichnik*? *The Maid of Orleans*? Then there's *Mazeppa*, and *The Sorceress*. Usually we hear only a tiny fraction of Tchaikovsky's operatic repertoire: namely *Eugene Onegin* (lost love plus duelling at dawn) and *The Queen of Spades* (fate, madness and suicide). And there is not necessarily a good reason for neglecting the others. Last season the London Philharmonic gave a concert

performance of *Iolanta*, a one-act gem about a blind girl who falls in love after being hidden from the world and is subsequently cured. It's full of tenderness, gentleness and Tchaikovsky's unfailing melodic invention. It shows one quality that not all Romantic music is meant to have: a sense of true human empathy.

We can't fully understand Tchaikovsky if we know only one side of him. For instance, much has been made of the inspiration he found in the fatalistic *Carmen*, but it has been little remarked that the sunny, good-natured main theme of his Violin Concerto's first movement bears an extraordinary resemblance to a melody in the final scene of Bizet's opera, where it appears in a minor key and a very different context (an imminent murder). Supposing – just supposing – that what Tchaikovsky loved in *Carmen* was not only its fatalism, but also its sheer melodic mellifluousness?

The one area in which Tchaikovsky's genius for otherworldly magic has been fully acknowledged is his ballet music. But it is *Swan Lake*, the first of the "big three", that is surely the most famous: it is suitably doom-laden. *The Sleeping Beauty* is nevertheless more subtle and original than its predecessor, and indeed more inspired; here good triumphs over evil and everyone lives happily ever after. And the score of *The Nutcracker* is the most sophisticated of all, its enchantments effected through Tchaikovsky's virtuoso manipulation of harmony, orchestration and astonishing melodic bending and stretching. Yet recent productions – Matthew Bourne's, for instance – have increasingly reinterpreted the story according to the music's undercurrents that suggest introversion, unfulfilled longing and loss.

Those qualities were a vital part of Tchaikovsky's creativity and of his sexual and emotional life. But while we concentrate on those, it's at the expense of too much else: his light touch, his warmth, his humour and above all that fantastical imagination that wove the magic core of fairy-tales out of sound and made it real. Perhaps Wiley's book and *The Tsarina's Slippers* can together help to reveal the unseen Tchaikovsky in all his glory, at last.

'*The Tsarina's Slippers*' opens at the Royal Opera House on 20 November (020-7304 4000)