

Gay Love-Letters from Tchaikovsky to his Nephew Bob Davidov

Gay men have taken to their hearts the music of Piotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky (1840-93) because it is perceived (rightly or wrongly) to contain all the longing and despair of homosexual angst in a homophobic world. Although he was one of the great musical thinkers, it is for the melodic lyricism and suffering so audible in his work, rather than its complexity or brilliance, that he will be remembered.



Tchaikovsky's homosexuality was denied by Soviet musicologists until fairly recently, and much material still remains to be retrieved from Russian archives and published in English. His lovers included Alexey Apukhtin in his music student days 1867-70; Vladimir Shilovsky, a wealthy young lad whom he also met at the Moscow Conservatory, during 1868-72, and who financed several trips for the two of them; Alexei Sofronov his valet from 1872 to the end of his life; his pupil Eduard Zak, who killed himself in 1873 (he inspired the *Romeo and Juliet Fantasy Overture*); Joseph Kotek in the mid-1870s; his nephew Vladimir Davidov (second son of his sister Alexandra) in the 1880s-1890s, to whom he dedicated the *Symphonie Pathétique* (1893); and the young pianist Vassily Sapelnikov who went with him on a tour to Germany, France and England. In addition, many brief affairs are recorded in his cryptographic diary; e.g. on March 22, 1889 he records that a 'Negro came in to me', to his hotel room in Paris.

But Tchaikovsky was uneasy about his sexuality – unlike his brother Modest, who was also gay, and who lived relatively openly with his boyfriend Nikolai ('Kolia') Hermanovich Konradi (1868-1923), a deaf and dumb boy whom Modest tutored and with whom he lived for about seventeen years from 1876. During a mid-life crisis at the age of thirty-six, Piotr wrote to his brother:

I am now going through a very critical period of my life. I will go into more detail later, but for now I will simply tell you, I have decided to get married. It is unavoidable. I must do it, not just for myself but for you, Modeste, and all those I love. I think that for both of us our dispositions are the greatest and most insuperable obstacle to happiness, and we must fight our natures to the best of our ability. So far as I am concerned, I will do my utmost to get married this year, and if I lack the necessary courage, I will at any rate abandon my habits forever. Surely you realize how painful it is for me to know that people pity and forgive me when in truth I am not guilty of anything. How appalling to think that those who love me are sometimes ashamed of me. In short, I seek marriage or some sort of public involvement with a woman so as to shut the mouths of assorted contemptible creatures whose opinions mean nothing to me, but who are in a position to cause distress to those near to me.

Tchaikovsky married Antonina Milyukova in 1877, but frankly told his wife he did not love her though he would be her devoted friend. Not surprisingly, the marriage ended disastrously after a few months, which brought Tchaikovsky close to a nervous



breakdown and helped him accept his unchangeable sexual nature and stop tormenting himself.

It is possible that Tchaikovsky married Milyukova ‘on the rebound’ after being rejected by some male lover. At the time, he was busy composing Tatiana's Letter Scene in his opera *Eugene Onegin*. He very clearly identified with Tatiana, who had been rejected by her lover Onegin. He had recently responded to a letter from Milyukova and had agreed to meet with her, but he pointedly notes in a letter to his brother Modest that he had entirely forgotten about Milyukova when working on his opera:

I didn't ask any more about Mlle Milyukova. I was entirely preoccupied at the time with thoughts about *Eugene Onegin*, i.e. with Tatiana whose letter had originally drawn me to composing the opera. I began writing the letter song, driven to the work by an irresistible emotional need, in the heat of

which I not only forgot about Antonina Milyukova, but even lost her letter or hid it so successfully that I couldn't find it. I remembered about it only when a little later I received the second one. I was completely buried in my composition and had grown so close to the character of Tatiana that she and all around her started to seem real to me. I loved Tatiana and was terribly angry with Onegin, whom I saw as simply cold and heartless. When I received the second letter, I was ashamed, and even came to hate myself for my attitude toward Mlle Milyukova. In this second letter she bitterly complained that she had not received a reply, adding that if the second letter met with the same fate as the first, the only course open to her was to take her own life. In my mind this all got associated with my conception of Tatiana, and it seemed to me as if I myself had behaved infinitely worse than Onegin.

But when he finally met Milyukova, the first thing he told her was ‘I could not return her love’. It is clear that the heart-rending Letter Scene was not inspired by Milyukova, but that his identification with Tatiana compelled him to agree to marry Milyukova, for fear of being as heartless as Onegin. Thus his identification with a female paradoxically made him temporarily reject his desires for a male, or, rather, his desire to be desired by a man like Onegin.

Vladimir Lvovich Davidov (1871/2-1906) – Tchaikovsky's nephew nicknamed ‘Bob’ [illustrated at the right] – became his lover from the late 1880s. Tchaikovsky was always homesick during his musical tours abroad – he hated the loneliness of large cities – and he always longed to get back home to be with his beloved nephew – ‘my idol’ – whom he made his heir. His letter to Bob from a hotel room in London in May 1893 shows this correspondence to have been his life-line: ‘I am writing to you with a voluptuous pleasure. The thought that this paper is going to be in your hands fills me with joy and brings tears to my eyes.’ Later that year ‘Kolia’ chucked out Modest, and there were plans to set up an apartment in St Petersburg where Modest, Piotr and Bob would live together.

But it was not to be, for in November 1893, less than a month after the premiere of the *Symphonie Pathétique*, Tchaikovsky was murdered. It was reported that he died from



cholera, caused by drinking an unboiled glass of water. On November 1 (New Style; the Russian Old Style calendar was twelve days behind this) he dined at a restaurant with Bob after seeing a play, and insisted on being brought a glass of water even though it was unboiled and even though his friends remonstrated with him. (Another version has it that he ran to the kitchen in Modest's apartment to get the unboiled water, shouting 'Who cares anyway!') On November 2 he fell ill, and on November 6 he was dead, from kidney failure and dehydration caused by vomiting and diarrhoea. But death from cholera cannot possibly occur so soon after an infection, and even Rimsky-Korsakov, who paid his respects to the composer's body in Modest's apartment, thought it was strange that the apartment had not been disinfected and that people were even allowed to kiss the corpse despite government regulations that required that the coffin be sealed in cases of cholera. Rumors of suicide began to fly. In the 1920s one of the doctors who attended him, Vasily Bertenson, admitted that Tchaikovsky had poisoned himself.

The facts of Tchaikovsky's death were revealed to the West by Alexandra Orlova, a Soviet musical scholar who emigrated to the USA in 1979. It was privately known in Soviet musical circles in the 1920s and 1930s (including people such as Alexander Glazunov) that Tchaikovsky had not died of cholera, but had killed himself. In 1966 Alexander Voitov, a pupil and historian of the St Petersburg School of Jurisprudence, told Orlova what really happened. In 1913 he was told by the widow of Nikolay Jacobi that she had a terrible secret she did not wish to take to the grave. In autumn 1893 Duke Stenbok-Fermor wrote a letter addressed to Tsar Alexander III complaining of the attentions the composer was paying his (the Duke's) young nephew; this letter was handed to the civil servant Jacobi to pass on to the Tsar. Exposure would have meant loss of civil rights and exile to Siberia, and public disgrace not only for Tchaikovsky, but for his fellow former students of the School of Jurisprudence. Instead of passing on the letter, Jacobi assembled a court of honor of the old boys of the school and summoned Tchaikovsky to his apartment. Jacobi's wife could hear loud voices behind the closed door, and after a meeting that lasted five hours Tchaikovsky ran unsteadily from the room, very white and agitated. When the others had gone Jacobi told his wife that the court of honor had required Tchaikovsky to kill himself and he had promised to comply with their demand. A day or two later his illness was reported. Nataliya Kuznetsova-Fladimova, the granddaughter of the sister of the wife of Tchaikovsky's eldest brother Nikolay, after reading Orlova's account in 1987, told her that the story was true, and was the same story told by her grandmother who died very old in 1955. Her grandmother also said that Tsar Alexander III was shown the incriminating letter to Count Stenbok after Tchaikovsky's death.

The prominence given to the supposedly infected glass of water shows it to have been a symbolic leave-taking; the major Tchaikovsky biographer David Brown calls it 'a very public demonstration of something happening, to give an explanation for something that was going to happen in due course.' Tchaikovsky's most recent biographer Alexander Poznansky rejects the court of honor story because he does not believe such things could happen in the civilized society that Russia was at this time. Poznansky even points out that there were other homosexuals in the School of Jurisprudence, such as the statesman Vladimir Meshesvsky, who was protected by the Tsar after being denounced for seducing a bugle boy in the imperial marching band. However, trying to seduce the son of Count

Stenbok might well have been considered more reprehensible and damaging to the public image of the School. In any event, the historian Simon Karlinsky has proved that courts of honor did in fact exist at the time (though usually they only demanded resignations etc., as when Chekhov's editor was called to a court of honor). Karlinsky acknowledges that the Russian law against homosexuality – more specifically, Paragraph 995 which prohibited *mujilostra* or anal intercourse between men – was not very often enforced. Nevertheless, there was a very notable scandal during Tchaikovsky's day, when a teacher who had seduced many teenage boys was tried and convicted, and exiled to the provincial city of Seratov for five years. (The maximum penalty was resettlement in Siberia for a period of five years.) Tolstoy in his book *Resurrection* mentions the case of a prominent homosexual who escapes legal punishment, and calls this a case of 'evil triumphant'. In other words, homosexuality was neither legal nor respectable in Russia. In any case Tchaikovsky's own comments quoted at the beginning of this essay indicate that a suspicion of homosexuality was often used to shame people. And he often felt shame, or at least regret, over his own homosexuality, writing in his diary, for example, 'What can I do to be normal?' The enigmatic Fate motif in his *Fourth Symphony* probably stands for the 'tragic curse' of his homosexual orientation.

Poznansky does not adequately account for the inconsistencies in the cholera story, which seems to have been concocted to hide the truth and to avoid the stigma of suicide. Everyone at his death bed gave conflicting accounts of exactly what happened, and one of the doctors' accounts suggests he died one day sooner than that reported. The Swiss musicologist Aloys Mooser and the French scholar André Lischke were both informed that Glazunov confirmed that Tchaikovsky was homosexual and had committed suicide, but Poznansky dismisses the accounts of Bertenson and others because they were reported orally after their deaths. When each claim is examined in isolation, it is admittedly 'weak', but since all of the claims confirm one another despite coming from different sources, they add up to 'strong' evidence in my opinion. Do a dozen weak links add up to a chain? Well, yes, they do.

In November 1993 the BBC broadcast a documentary on the death of Tchaikovsky, called 'Pride or Prejudice,' which interviewed Orlova, Brown, Poznansky and Karlinsky and various experts on Russian history, and concluded largely in favor of the theory that Tchaikovsky had been sentenced to death, ordered to do the decent thing. Dr John Henry of Guy's Hospital, who works in the British National Poison Unit, concluded that all the reported symptoms of Tchaikovsky's illness 'fit very closely with arsenic poisoning,' and he suggested that people would have known that acute diarrhoea, dehydration and kidney failure resembled the manifestations of cholera which would help them put the death over as a case of cholera.

There is a similar argument about the truth behind Tchaikovsky's sixth and last symphony, the *Pathétique*, which some find profoundly enigmatic and some find profoundly self-revealing: a longing to reveal something, a sense of tragic destiny, a struggle for happiness defeated by implacable 'fate', i.e. oppression, a union of defiance and despair with which many gay men have identified at least until the 1970s. Tchaikovsky decided not to leave a detailed programmatic explanation of his darkest work: 'Let them guess!' he told Modest. The last movement, the Adagio Lamentoso, is prophetic not only of Tchaikovsky's own death, but also that of its dedicatee, Bob Davıdov, who became curator of the Tchaikovsky Museum at his uncle's home in Klin, and who killed himself, at the age of thirty-five.

Piotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky to Vladimir Lvovich Davidov

*New York
2 May 1891*

Things have gone so far that it is quite impossible to write letters. Not a free moment, and I scarcely manage to write my diary. I made a trip to Niagara. As soon as I returned I had to visit one Mayer at his country house and pay some visits in the few free hours I had left. Then I was invited out to lunch. Altogether I have been frightfully busy, and I am completely numb with exhaustion. Tonight I have to be at a big dinner, and then leave at midnight for Baltimore; tomorrow a rehearsal and concert there, the day after that Washington, then Philadelphia, then two days here, where all my time is already booked, and at last, on the morning of the 21st, I leave. Oh God! Will I ever come to that happy moment!!!

In about a week after you receive this letter I will be with you!!! This seems an unattainable, impossible happiness! I try to think of it as little as possible, to have enough strength to stand up to the last insufferable days. But in spite of all I feel that I shall remember America with love. Everybody has been wonderfully kind.

Here are a few newspaper cuttings. Shall bring many more with me. I think that you will all much prefer reading my diary than getting only short news from my letters.

I embrace you all.
P. Tchaikovsky
In only one week!!!

*Town of Klin
District of Moscow
25 June 1891*

Bob!

As promised I can report that I finished the sketches for the ballet yesterday evening. You remember how, when you were here, I boasted that I had only about five days work left. How wrong I was, for I barely managed it in two weeks. No! the old man is definitely deteriorating. Not only is his hair thinning and as white as snow; not only are his teeth falling out and refusing to chew; not only is his sight deteriorating and his eyes getting tired; not only are his legs beginning to drag –p but the only faculty he has is beginning to fade and disappear. . . . I get very tired if I read in the evenings – it always results in a frightful headache. But unless I read I don't know how else to kill time at night. This (I mean headaches as a result of reading), is becoming a serious obstacle to life in the country, which made me decide to look for a place to live that was not in the suburbs of Petersburg but in the town itself. In general I think it would be simpler to settle in Petersburg for good. Just the possibility alone to be able to see more of you is so vitally important for me. I would love to know what you are doing. Write at least a few words.

. . .

*Klin, District of Moscow
22 July 1891*

I am definitely coming to Kamenka, for I feel from your letter that you would like me to come, and also because I have a great desire to see you. . . .

You are not at all like an empty suitcase. There are plenty of things in it but they are still kept in disorder and it will take time to decide and sort out those that are important. However, stop worrying, for it will all sort itself out. Enjoy your youth and learn to cherish time; the longer I live the more frightened I get at the aimless dissipation of this priceless element of life. This rather high-flown sentence is nothing more than the advice to *read as much as possible*. You have an excellent gift of assimilating what you have read, I mean you do not forget it but put it away in a sort of mental store-room until you need it. I do not possess such a store-room. To be honest – no memory at all. Am sending several numbers of the *Fliegende Blätter*.

I embrace you, my idol!
P. T.

Paris
12-24 January 1892

I feel an awful fool. Here I have another two weeks without anything to help me kill time. I thought this would be easier in Paris than anywhere else but, except for the first day, I have been bored. Since yesterday I do not know what to think up to be free of the worry and boredom that come from idleness. . . . Am still keeping my incognito. . . .

I often think of you and see you in my dreams, usually looking sad and depressed. This has added a feeling of compassion to my love for you and makes me love you even more. Oh God! How I want to see you this very minute. Write me a letter from College during some boring lecture and send it to this address (14, Rue Richepanse). It will still reach me as I am staying here for nearly two weeks.

I embrace you with mad tenderness.

Yours
P. Tchaikovsky

Klin
12 August 1892

My dear Golubchik!

I have just received your letter, and was terribly pleased to hear that you are in a happy state of mind. Could it be that one of my letters to you has been lost? I did not write very often but I did write. With all my soul I long to join you, and think about it all the time. But what can I do? There are more and more complications and more work every day. . . .

So all I can say is that it is impossible for me to leave before I have finished all my business in Moscow.

I embrace you to suffocation!!!
P. T.

Moscow
14 August 1892

I have just received the Paris photographs from Yurgenson and have told him to send four of them to you. I was so glad to see what a good likeness they were that I nearly started crying in the presence of Yurgenson. All this proof correction had completely destroyed all other feelings and thoughts and it had to be this little incident which made me feel again how strong my love for you is. . . . Oh God! How I want to see you.

I embrace you.
P. Tchaikovsky

Berlin
16-28 December 1892

I am still sitting in Berlin. I haven't got enough energy to leave – especially as there is no hurry. These last days I have been considering and reflecting on matters of great importance. I looked perfectly objectively through my new symphony and was glad that I had neither orchestrated it or launched it; it makes a quite unfavourable impression. . . . What must I do? Forget about composing? Too difficult to say. So here I am, thinking, and thinking, and thinking, and not knowing what to decide. Whatever happens these last three days were unhappy ones.

I am however, quite well, and have at last decided to leave for Basle tomorrow. You wonder why I am writing about all this to you? Just an irresistible longing to chat with you. . . . The weather is quite warm. I can picture you sitting in your room, scented nearly to suffocation, working at your college exercises. How I would love to be in that dear room! Give my love to everybody.

I embrace you.
P. Tchaikovsky

If only I could give way to my secret desire, I would leave everything and go home.

Klin
11 February 1893

If you do not want to write, at least spit on a piece of paper, put it in an envelope, and send it to me. You are not taking any notice of me at all. God forgive you – all I wanted was a few words from you.

I am going to Moscow tonight. The concert will be on the 14th. On the 15th I shall be going to Nijny-Novgorod for about three days and from there straight to Petersburg. About the end of the second week in Lent, therefore, I shall be with you.

I want to tell you about the excellent state of mind I'm in so far as my works are concerned. You know that I destroyed the symphony I had composed and partly orchestrated in the autumn. And a good thing too! There was nothing of interest in it – an empty play of sounds, without inspiration. Now, on my journey, the idea of a new symphony came to me, this time one with a programme, but a programme that will be a

riddle for everyone. Let them try and solve it. The work will be entitled *A Programme Symphony* (No. 6) *Symphonie à Programme* (No. 6), *Eine Programmsinfonie* (Nr. 6) [Modest suggested the title finally adopted, *Symphonie Pathétique*]. The programme of this symphony is completely saturated with myself and quite often during my journey I cried profusely. Having returned I have settled down to write the sketches and the work is going so intensely, so fast, that the first movement was ready in less than four days, and the others have taken shape in my head. Half of the third movement is also done. There will still be much that is new in the form of this work and the finale is not to be a loud *allegro*, but the slowest *adagio*. You cannot imagine my feelings of bliss now that I am convinced that the time has not gone forever, and that I can still work. Of course, I may be wrong, but I do not think so. Please, do not tell anyone, except Modest.

I purposely address the letter to the College, so that no one shall read it. Does all this really interest you? It sometimes seems to me that you are not interested at all and that you have no real sympathy for me. Good-bye, my dear. . . .

Yours
P. Tchaikovsky

London
17-29 May 1893

I am writing to you with a voluptuous pleasure. The thought that this paper is going to be in your hands fills me with joy and brings tears to my eyes. Is it not curious that I voluntarily inflict upon myself all these tortures? What the devil do I want it all for? Several times yesterday, on my way, I wanted to run away; but somehow I felt ashamed to return empty-handed. Yesterday my tortures reached such a pitch that I lost both appetite and sleep and this happens very rarely. I am suffering not only from anguish and distress which cannot be expressed in words (in my new symphony there is a place which I think expresses it very well) but also from a vague feeling of fear and the devil only knows what else. The physical symptoms are pains at the bottom of my bowels, and aching and weakness in the legs. So, definitely, this is the last time I am going through all this. From now on I shall agree to go anywhere only for a very large sum of money and not for more than three days. . . .

Klin
3 [or 2] August 1893

In my last letter to Modest I complain that you don't want to know me, and now he is silent too, and all links with your crowd are completely broken. . . .

What makes me sad is that you take so little interest in me. Could it be that you are positively a hard egotist? However, forgive me, I won't pester you again. The symphony which I was going to dedicate to you (not so sure that I shall now) is getting on. I am very pleased with the music but not entirely satisfied with the instrumentation. It does not come out as I hoped it would. It will be quite conventional and no surprise if this symphony is abused and unappreciated – that has happened before. But I definitely find it my very best, and in particular the most sincere of all my compositions. I love it as I have never loved any of my musical children.

. . . At the end of August I shall have to go abroad for a week. If I were sure that you would still be in Verbovka in September I would love to come at the beginning of the month. But I know nothing about you.

I embrace you with all my love.
P. Tchaikovsky

SOURCES: Piotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky, *Letters to his Family: An Autobiography*, trans. Galina von Meck; with additional annotations by Percy M. Young (London: Dennis Dobson, 1981). English translations copyright © 1973 by Galina von Meck. *The Diaries of Tchaikovsky*, trans. Wladimir Lakond (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, Ind., 1945). David Brown, *Tchaikovsky Remembered* (London and Boston: Faber and Faber, 1993).

CITATION: If you cite this Web page, please use the following form of citation:
Rictor Norton, "Gay Love-Letters from Tchaikovsky to his Nephew Bob Davidof", *The Great Queens of History*, 19 October 2002, updated 5 November 2005 <<http://www.infopt.demon.co.uk/tchaikov.htm>>.
