Not to Be Born Were Best? A Review of Henry Zajaczkowski's Article on Tchaikovsky's Hidden Program within the *Pathétique Symphony*

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Not to Be Born Were Best? A Review of Henry Zajaczkowski's Article on Tchaikovsky's Hidden Program within the *Pathétique Symphony*

**Abstract**
Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky’s death and final symphony have long been shrouded in mystery. The well-known myth of the symphony’s program suggests that Tchaikovsky left behind a program for his *Sixth*, to whose existence he hinted throughout his letters and diaries. However, his original program has not been found and divulged after his death. Musicologists have since attempted to reconstruct it from the clues available, although his vague description of it has led to a wide range of speculations. This task is further complicated by the questionable legitimacy of much of the early scholarship surrounding the issue at hand, presenting today’s scholars with the challenge of separating fact from fiction. This paper will scrutinize musicologist, Henry Zajaczkowski’s proposition, which is constructed around repression in the composer’s life, particularly regarding his sexuality and his familial relationships. The paper will also expand on Zajaczkowski’s research, and his refutation of Alexandra Orlova’s 1979 claim that the Russian Government forced Tchaikovsky’s suicide. Today, the forced-suicide claim is widely regarded as false, and Tchaikovsky’s death seems to have been nothing more than misfortune. In light of this, the article will point to the impossibility in deciphering the *Pathétique* symphony’s true program despite the numerous clues that Tchaikovsky has left for us to piece it together.

**Keywords**
Tchaikovsky, Program Music, Symphony No. 6 "Pathétique", Repression, Suicide

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Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky’s Symphony no. 6 and its mysterious program have long been a subject of debate in the musicological universe. Due to Tchaikovsky’s untimely death, merely nine days after the Sixth’s premiere, the most ferociously disputed theory proposes that this symphony acts as the composer’s swan song and suicide letter, although he never left any evidence suggesting so. We can only speculate whether the composer was aware that the Sixth would be his final symphony, but biographical analyses by musicologists, notably Alexander Poznansky, suggest that he was not. This begs to ask whether Tchaikovsky secretly devised a different program to what he called his greatest work, as letters, diaries, and several accounts of actual events do seem to allude to its existence. This review will focus on one of the symphony’s possible programs as conceptualized by Henry Zajaczkowski. It will discuss the intrigue behind this program while pointing out areas requiring further research. Additionally, it will present newer research
undertaken in the decades following Zajackowski’s publication to demonstrate the difficulty in deciphering Tchaikovsky’s true program.

The article in question was written by Henry Zajaczkowski, a performer, composer, and musicologist specializing in the music of Tchaikovsky. For his Ph.D. research, he focused on Tchaikovsky’s symphonies, and a section of his dissertation was published as a journal article in *The Music Review*. He also authored *Tchaikovsky’s Musical Style*, and *An Introduction to Tchaikovsky’s Operas*. Although he never worked as a professor in musicology, he has made significant contributions to the field as a researcher and writer. In his article, titled *Not to Be Born Were Best*, Zajaczkowski proposes a possible program for Tchaikovsky’s *Sixth*, focusing primarily on the composer’s repressed life, while refusing to take a firm stance on the popular theory of the symphony as a suicide letter.¹ Instead, he surreptitiously alludes to this possibility, but refutes Soviet musicologist Alexandra Orlova’s theory, which presumes that the Russian government forced Tchaikovsky’s suicide. Drawing on knowledge of Tchaikovsky’s mental health and personal relationships from the composer’s diaries and letters, Zajaczkowski categorizes the repression faced by the composer into three specific subcategories: death, Tchaikovsky’s relationship with his mother, and his struggle with homosexuality. It is these aspects of Tchaikovsky’s life that Zajaczkowski believes inspired the *Sixth*.

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Zajaczkowski supports his proposed program through an interpretational analysis of Tchaikovsky’s compositional techniques and musical material. Using operas such as Eugene Onegin and The Queen of Spades, where themes connote specific meanings due to the presence of text, Zajaczkowski links the symphony finale’s opening to the theme of death by highlighting melodic similarities with arias pertaining to the same theme. He draws another parallel with Georges Bizet’s Carmen—a favorite of Tchaikovsky’s—presenting a reason for the composer’s hysteria: apparent Oedipal feelings toward his mother, creating a rivalry between him and his twin brothers for her affection. Zajaczkowski’s final argument is one upon which musicologists have fixated for decades—Tchaikovsky’s feelings for his nephew, the young Vladimir Davidov. He suggests that the desolate ending to the symphony represents the composer’s attempt to form a relationship with Davidov, and emphasizes his inability to express his love for the boy; homosexuality, and relations with one so much younger, were frowned upon in Imperial Russia. Furthermore, Zajaczkowski sums up his findings with Greek tragedian Sophocles’ words: “Not to be born were best”, asserting an anti-natalist philosophy also discussed by Schopenhauer and David Benatar. As such, Zajaczkowski inconspicuously explicates his belief that perhaps Tchaikovsky would have been better off not being born.

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2 A Google Scholar search for “Tchaikovsky gay” yields over 4500 results; on JSTOR gives over 700 results.
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Zajaczkowski’s chosen subject is quite controversial. Ever since émigrée Soviet musicologist Alexandra Orlova’s sensational revelation of Tchaikovsky’s apparent forced suicide by the Russian government, the *Sixth* has attracted much scrutiny by virtue of being the composer’s final work.\(^5\) In 1966, Orlova’s source was Alexander Voytov, a Leningrad museum curator who had kept a story secret since 1913. It was passed on to Voytov by the wife of the former-head prosecutor of the Russian Senate, Nikolai Jacobi, a former classmate of Tchaikovsky’s at the School of Jurisprudence. According to this story, Tchaikovsky had been having an affair with the nephew of one Duke Stenbock-Thurmor, who reported it in a letter to Tsar Alexander III. The letter was delivered to Jacobi, who then decided to call a court of honour instead. Had he delivered the letter to the Tsar, he would have risked causing a global scandal since Tchaikovsky was well-renowned. Comprised of many of Tchaikovsky’s former classmates, the court of honour met with the composer on October 31\(^{st}\) of 1893, asking for his death—which came seven days later—to save the Tsar and the country from disgrace.\(^6\) Although some still cling to this sufficiently-refuted tragic fantasy, Simon Morrison aptly summarizes most of current musicology’s stance on Orlova’s claims, calling it a “piece of gossip.”\(^7\) Zajaczkowski’s writing, however, predates substantial research on this topic, and only uses Orlova’s claims against Alexander Poznansky’s factual rebuttal as starting points. Zajaczkowski states that he “has no fresh evidence on this

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\(^6\) Ibid., 412-413.

\(^7\) Simon Morrison, “Waist-deep: In the mire of Russian and Western debates about Tchaikovsky,” The Times Literary Supplement (May 1, 2015), 15.
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matter”, however, he leans more towards Poznansky’s interpretation than Orlova’s.\(^8\)

Zajaczkowski interprets the end of the symphony as a representation of the acceptance of death. Through the use of musical examples, he demonstrates how the opening theme of the finale—which follows the same melodic contour as arias with the theme of death from both, *Eugene Onegin*, and *The Queen of Spades*—is first orchestrated with an odd interchanging of parts in the strings.\(^9\) According to Zajaczkowski, by omitting this interchanging of parts in the symphony’s thematic reprise, Tchaikovsky indicates his ultimate acceptance of death.\(^10\) However, this conclusion bespeaks of Zajaczkowski’s own creativity rather than Tchaikovsky’s preoccupation with death, as any number of such parallels could be drawn between the symphony and general musical characteristics of his other works. Zajaczkowski’s analysis is clearly hermeneutical, basing the evidence for his arguments on his personal interpretation of specifically selected passages rather than on factual sources or in-depth analyses. The plausible narrative that emerges is a result of Zajaczkowski’s clever manipulation of short musical examples, which he presents as out-of-context reductions.

Furthermore, Zajaczkowski fails to provide the reader with sufficient information regarding the myth of the symphony’s program—a result of Tchaikovsky’s decision to keep it secret. Zajackowski concludes the introduction of his article with the

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\(^9\) Henry Zajaczkowski, “Not to Be Born Were Best,” 562.

\(^10\) Ibid., 563.
composer’s famous words on the mysterious program, in which he states that the program “will remain a riddle to all – let them try and guess.”¹¹ In the full quotation, Tchaikovsky explains how he conceptualized the program, what it might entail, and his own emotional reaction to his work. He writes in a letter to Davidov, in February of 1893,

…Just as I was starting on my journey, the idea of another symphony visited me, this time programmatic but with the programme that will remain a riddle for everybody – let them guess; and the symphony will be entitled: ‘A Programme Symphony (No. 6)’. This programme is penetrated by subjective sentiment. During my journey, while composing it in my mind, I frequently shed tears.¹²

Although Zajaczkowski mentions the “Programme Symphony” title as coined by the composer himself, he fails to recognize and acknowledge the importance of its secrecy. After abandoning the E♭ major symphony, about which he had excitingly told everyone, Tchaikovsky preferred to keep the program of the Sixth a secret and took great care to send this letter to Davidov’s school, instead of his shared residence in Saint Petersburg. In a Russia where intellectuals were closely monitored and often censored, had the letter been sent to the residence which was located close to the Saint Petersburg Police Department, it would


have almost certainly been opened and read, divulging Tchaikovsky’s secret and likely affecting his compositional process.\footnote{Modest Tchaikovsky, \textit{The Life and Letters of Peter Ilich Tchaikovsky} (New York: Haskell House, 1970), 2.} The quiet way in which Tchaikovsky went about the composition of the \textit{Sixth}, sharing only minimal information with those closest to him, forms the foundation of the program’s intrigue. Furthermore, at the first performance of this work, fellow composer Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov recognized the symphony’s narrative qualities and asked Tchaikovsky if there were a program, which Tchaikovsky confirmed whilst choosing not to share it.\footnote{Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov, \textit{My Musical Life} (New York: Tudor Publishing, 1923), 287-8.} Even Modest, Tchaikovsky’s brother and closest friend, was not familiar with the hidden meaning of the composer’s final work, but confirmed that there was indeed a program. When questioned about it by Czech musicologist Rudolph Batka in 1907, Modest answered, “You would like to know the program of the \textit{Sixth} symphony, but unfortunately I cannot tell you anything, since my brother kept it secret in his thoughts. He carried this secret with him to the grave.”\footnote{Franz Zagiba, \textit{Tschaikowsky: Leben und Werk} (Leipzig: Amalthea-Verlag, 1953), 328. (Translation from Alexander Poznansky).} Tchaikovsky ensured that it would remain a mystery to all by keeping the program secret, even from Modest.

In Zajaczkowski’s article, the comparison between Bizet’s opera and the composer’s relationship with his mother and twin brothers is the weakest argument. Without any substantial proof, he verges on over-explicating Tchaikovsky’s unconscious sexual attraction toward his mother. The Oedipal argument is not
originally Zajaczkowski’s, however its explicit application to Tchaikovsky’s relationship with his mother can be traced to Zajackowski. Decades before his article, psychiatrist James A. Brussel argued that Tchaikovsky suffered from an, “unresolved Oedipus complex caused by the death of his mother when he was fourteen years old…” and that he displaced his maternal feelings onto two other figures in his life. The first, his patroness Nadezhda von Meck, who Brussel claimed was, “his surrogate for married life,” and the second, his favourite brother Modest.16 This popular hypothesis does not allude to any sexual attraction of Tchaikovsky toward his mother, so the basis of Zajackowski’s argument is unclear. Perhaps the most far-fetched claim in the article is that Tchaikovsky saw himself as Don José from Carmen, and his brothers Anatoly and Modest as Escamillo—José’s rival for Carmen’s love. This comparison suggests that to the composer, his brothers were rivals for their mother’s love. Zajaczkowski makes a precarious claim that the composer was jealous to the point of wishing death on his mother, as Don José kills Carmen to prevent her from being with Escamillo. This interpretation is left unsupported and is in direct opposition to the fact that Tchaikovsky’s mother was always quite dear to him.17 He was devastated by her death and grew closer to his brothers, particularly Modest, and their lengthy and warm correspondences make it absurd to believe he could ever wish death upon either of them.18

18 Ibid., 13.
Moreover, Zajaczkowski’s treatment of Tchaikovsky’s quotation of the Russian Orthodox requiem stands inadequate due to the growing importance of religion in the composer’s later years. To this, only one short paragraph is dedicated, in which Zajaczkowski draws yet another comparison with Carmen. He presents a claim by John Warrack that the requiem chant quotation in the Sixth represents Don José’s “Flower song”, but the link is vague. A more plausible reason to justify the chant’s inclusion would be the composer’s religious life. Tchaikovsky had a complicated, life-long relationship with religion where he supported his devout brother Modest and envied his friend Mily Balakirev when the latter became profoundly religious. His personal views mirrored those of Lev Tolstoy, whose novel Confession outlined his own struggle with religion. Tchaikovsky believed he himself was less tortured by religion than Tolstoy, but still saw much of his own struggle reflected in Confession, believing that he had come to a similar conclusion even before reading Tolstoy’s novel. Furthermore, Tchaikovsky read numerous works considered part of the nineteenth-century branch of theology called Christology, which focuses on Jesus Christ as a historical figure rather than the Messiah. He read David Strauss’ and Ernest Renan’s The Life of Jesus, and his copy of Renan’s book was filled with marginalia. His understanding of these texts led him to accept the figure of Christ the man, a belief contrary to that of the Orthodox Church, thereby creating a schism between

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20 Marina Ritzarev, Tchaikovsky’s Pathétique and Russian Culture, 23-24.
21 Ibid., 24-25.
22 The original title for David Strauss’s work is Das Leben Jesu, kritisch bearbeitet (1835-36), and for Ernest Renan’s is Vie de Jésus (1863).
him and the Church. In Zajaczkowski’s interpretation, he ignores Tchaikovsky’s thoughts on religion, despite his passing mention of the Orthodox chant.

Regardless of all personal struggles with religion, Tchaikovsky includes the chant tune, “with thy saints, O Christ, give peace to the soul of thy servant,” in the development of the symphony’s first movement (mm. 202–205). This quotation thus supports a theory of the Sixth being Tchaikovsky’s symphonic version of a Passion, as presented by musicologist Marina Ritzarev in Tchaikovsky’s Pathétique and Russian Culture. She argues that direct, recognizable quotation of the chant is unnecessary, as the mood of the piece firmly grounds the affect of death in the listener’s mind. Tchaikovsky must then have had another purpose for its inclusion, and Ritzarev proposes that he chose it due to its rhythmic and melodic resemblance to the Dies Irae chant, making it recognizable to Western audiences. Even though this chant is part of a requiem, and not a Passion, Ritzarev argues that it strengthens her theory of the Passion-symphony because it places the “topic of prayer” in the listener’s mind. To solidify this theory, she links the work to Johann Sebastian Bach, composer of the most well-known works within the Passion genre. An interesting similarity noted by Ritzarev between the Sixth and Bach’s famous St. Matthew Passion is that both works’ beginnings reflect their endings. Tchaikovsky begins his symphony with a quiet, slow introduction, mirroring the way the music falls away into nothing at the end. Bach’s St. Matthew

23 Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky, Symphony No. 6, Opus 74. (Mainz: Ernst Eulenburg & Co, 2010), 48.
24 Marina Ritzarev, Tchaikovsky’s Pathétique and Russian Culture, 47.
25 Ibid., 82-83.
Passion begins with Zion urging her companions to lament with her, “Kommt, ihr Töchter, helft mir klagen” (Come, daughters, help me lament), even though nothing yet has happened to justify this. Once the crucifixion story is told, the closing chorus, “Wir setzen uns mit Tränen nieder” (We sit down with tears) engages the same affect as was urged by the tears in the opening lament.\textsuperscript{26} Hence, this opening lament is presented retrospectively, after the story has taken place, in essence mirroring its end. Furthermore, the Sixth’s introduction (Example 1) also follows a similar melodic motif as the opening chorus of the St. Matthew Passion (Example 2), and they are both in the key of E minor.\textsuperscript{27}

\textit{Example 1.} Transcription of \textit{Symphony no. 6}, Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky, mm. 1–6


\textsuperscript{27} Marina Ritzarev, \textit{Tchaikovsky’s Pathétique and Russian Culture}, 62.
Example 2. Transcription of *St Matthew Passion*, Johann Sebastian Bach, mm. 1–5
These similarities, although possibly coincidental, form the base for Ritzarev’s theory of the Sixth as a Passion, pointing to the large number of possibilities in interpreting Tchaikovsky’s symphony, depending upon which aspect one chooses to concentrate.

The abandoned Life symphony in E♭ major is also overlooked in Zajaczkowski’s proposed program. This symphony was originally intended to be Tchaikovsky’s sixth and had a premeditated program, but he abandoned it in 1892. The program appears on the first page of sketches:

The ultimate essence of the plan of the symphony is LIFE.
First part – all impulsive passion, confidence, thirst for activity. Must be short. (Finale DEATH – result of collapse.)
Second part love;
Third disappointments;
Fourth ends dying away (also short).28

The “dying away” portion is of particular interest, as the Sixth ends in a decrescendo to pianissississimo—an atypical feature of any grand symphony’s ending. This has invited speculation that Tchaikovsky recycled the program originally intended for his Life symphony, and instead used it for the Sixth. After his failure with his much-anticipated Life symphony, the composer chose to keep many of the details of the composition of the Sixth a secret, sharing sparingly with Davidov, and Modest.29 This failure had

29 Marina Ritzarev, Tchaikovsky’s Pathétique and Russian Culture, 2.
paralyzed Tchaikovsky’s creativity, leading him to want to burn his sketches, but a letter from Davidov convinced him otherwise.\textsuperscript{30} His nephew told him in December of 1892, “I feel sorry of course, for the symphony that you have cast down from the cliff as they used to do with children in Sparta, because it seemed to you deformed, whereas it is probably as much a work of genius as the first five.”\textsuperscript{31} This response inspired Tchaikovsky not to throw away his sketches, and he eventually used them in his \textit{Piano Concerto No. 3 in E-flat Major}, Opus 75. It also inspired him not to give up on writing a programmatic symphony.\textsuperscript{32} Similarities between the \textit{Life} symphony’s program and the \textit{Sixth} are apparent, particularly in the outline for the fourth movement, pointing to the possibility that Tchaikovsky may have recycled this earlier program, a possibility Zajaczkowski has overlooked in the construction of his own program.

The article’s title summarizes Zajaczkowski’s thoughts on the suicide-symphony theory, although he neglects to elaborate on it. He argues that while the desolate ending might be suicidal, it should be understood more broadly, as Tchaikovsky’s reminder of the cruelty of life.\textsuperscript{33} The original passage from Sophocles’ \textit{Oedipus at Colonus} reads as follows:

\begin{center}
\textit{Nota Bene}
\end{center}

\begin{center}
\textsuperscript{32} Alexander Poznansky, \textit{Tchaikovsky: The Quest for the Inner Man}, 553.
\textsuperscript{33} Henry Zajaczkowski, “Not to Be Born Were Best,” 566.
\end{center}
Not to be born is, beyond all estimation best; but when a man has seen the light of day, this is next best by far, that with utmost speed he should go back from where he came. For when he has seen youth go by, with its easy merry-making, what hard affliction is foreign to him, what suffering does he not know? Envy, factions, strife, battles, and murders. Last of all falls to his lot old age, blamed, weak, unsociable, friendless, wherein dwells every misery among miseries."

This is one of the earliest examples of anti-natalist philosophy, a term coined by Théophile de Giraud. The main idea of this philosophy is that “those who can never exist cannot be deprived,” and that “by coming into existence one does suffer quite serious harms that could not have befallen [them], had one not come into existence.” Arthur Schopenhauer held a similar view, stating, “You may look upon life as an unprofitable episode, disturbing the blessed calm of non-existence.” Zajaczkowski vaguely alludes to this philosophy in his closing statements, suggesting that it is a thought brought on by the

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human condition and repressed by all. It is not the idea that life should cease, but that life should never be. A leader in modern anti-natalist philosophy, David Benatar claims that a life is not worth living if it contains even the slightest amount of bad. The only life worth living then, is one that is only good; a life that certainly does not exist.

The counterargument to this philosophy is that only through existence can beings experience the joys of life: pleasure, love, happiness, satisfaction, etc. Only then can they contribute to society in meaningful, humanly ways. Tchaikovsky’s life certainly contained many hardships, from his mother’s early death to his failed marriage to Antonina Milyukova, as well as his struggles to fit into a society that did not accept his sexual tendencies. Despite these, however, he made significant contributions to world culture, evidencing the positive aspects of life he must have experienced. Anti-natalism might still argue that his life was not worth living, and thus depriving the world of his contributions. The philosophy demarks all possible contributions an individual may make as unimportant, since the bad aspects of life negate the good, making it incompatible with the positive potential of the tortured artist.

Zajaczkowski’s refutation of Orlova’s 1979 revelation is the most convincing and factual segment of his article. He presents the dates of the Sixth’s composition (completed on August 31st, 1893), and the rumored dates during which the “court-of-honor” that would have forced Tchaikovsky’s suicide

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38 Henry Zajaczkowski, “Not to Be Born Were Best,” 566.
met (autumn of 1893), making it clear that Orlova’s information must be inaccurate.\(^\text{40}\) The symphony was written before the composer would have been told to sacrifice his life in order to avoid a national scandal. Twenty-five years after the publication of Zajaczkowski’s article, Orlova’s claim is now widely accepted as false. To add to his refutation of Orlova, there is, however, certain information presented by Alexander Poznansky that Zajaczkowski has overlooked. Poznansky’s research on Tchaikovsky uses primary sources (mostly from the Tchaikovsky House-Museum in Klin, Russia) and provides a detailed description of the history of cholera in Russia, and of Tchaikovsky’s final days. In Modest Tchaikovsky’s still-unpublished autobiography, Poznansky finds a claim that his brother had no paranoia of cholera, even though it was the cause of their mother’s death. In his final days before contracting cholera himself, Tchaikovsky seemed not to have any knowledge of his coming death. He began revising some of his works, including *Oprichnik* and *Eugene Onegin*, and agreed to travel to Amsterdam in March of 1894 for a concert. A few days later, he woke up feeling ill, and his condition only worsened from then until his death. Due to his lack of fear of cholera, Modest believed that his brother had been negligent and had drunk non-potable water. His unwitting actions have been misinterpreted, giving birth to a suicide theory, and many have wondered if he tried to contract the disease on purpose. However, as the disease was mainly found in the peasant class, the likeliness of Tchaikovsky contracting it was minimal, so had he truly wanted

to die, there were much easier ways. Ultimately, he was just incredibly unlucky.\textsuperscript{41}

Although I agree with Zajaczkowski that Orlova’s claims are outlandish, I do not believe that his proposed program fully captures the mystery behind Tchaikovsky’s final symphony. Tchaikovsky has become a hugely tragic figure due to his well-documented struggle with mental illness and his repressed homosexuality, and although Zajaczkowski suggests so, the composer’s relationship with his mother is not the most obvious reason for his depression. The lack of factual evidence to support his theory, along with the use of unsubstantiated claims, weakens Zajaczkowski’s hypothesis. His proposed program would be much more plausible were it substantiated by primary sources, as Tchaikovsky knowingly left us just enough information to form various speculations, without confirming the symphony’s true program. That being said, Zajaczkowski’s chosen quotation from Sophocles, “Not to be born were best,” aptly summarizes his article, and gives continued life to the program’s myth.

Tchaikovsky lived a tragic and repressed life, full of self-doubt and self-criticism, a difficult life for anyone to live, and it is this aspect that comes out in his final symphony. However, in contradiction to Sophocles and the anti-natalist philosophy that his words present, Tchaikovsky was born, and our world culture is richer having had him among us. Although his life was difficult and he perhaps at times did not want to live it, Tchaikovsky made the most of it, despite the pain and suffering it brought him.

Bibliography


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