

Nationalism in Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky's Music

-- Take the piano suite "the four seasons" as an example

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Abstract. Tchaikovsky is one of the most famous Russian musicians. His music creation strives to express the people's inner world. The piano suite the "Four Seasons", based on the seasonal changes in Russia throughout the year, reflects Russia's natural scenery, customs, festivals and daily life, and has a strong Russian national style. Starting from Tchaikovsky's historical background, this paper analyzes the nationalist characteristics of the Four Seasons.

Keywords: Tchaikovsky, the four seasons, russian music, nationalism.

1. Introduction

In 1812, Russia achieved a significant victory against Napoleon's invasion, fostering national pride among the people, which sparked patriotic fervor and the first national awakening [1]. Following the abolition of serfdom by Alexander II in 1861, the Czarist regime embarked on reforms in military, finance, national education, and press and publishing, leading to rapid economic development in Russia. Alongside this economic growth, there was also significant advancement in people's ideology and culture, with the rise of social thoughts contributing to the flourishing of Russian music [2]. In the 1860s, the "New Russian School" emerged in Saint Petersburg, also known as the "Mighty Handful" or "The Russian Five." Their musical compositions were marked by a distinct national character. They all revered Glinka and aspired to inherit and promote Russian folk music, deeply reflecting the thoughts, lives, and emotions of the Russian people in their creations. On the other hand, they also drew upon the achievements of Western European music. At the turn of the 20th century, the Moscow School emerged, with representatives such as Tchaikovsky, Taneyev, and Rachmaninoff. The Moscow School possessed a more moderate tone and was closer to the Western European classical music model [3].

Although Tchaikovsky was a representative figure of the academic school, after accidentally interacting with members of "The Mighty Handful," he was also influenced by them. He placed greater emphasis on the application of national elements in music, stressing that music should possess rich emotional content, that folk music serves as the foundation and source for the development of professional music, and that music ought to exhibit distinct national characteristics. This article takes Tchaikovsky's piano suite "The Four Seasons" as an example to analyze the nationalist features present in his music.

2. Analysis of Tchaikovsky's Musical Characteristics

Tchaikovsky (1840-1893) was a great Russian composer born into an aristocratic family in Votkinsk, Russia. From a young age, he displayed a love for music, and as a result, he had already mastered basic piano-playing skills before entering school for formal musical education [4]. At the Conservatory, Tchaikovsky studied music theory, piano performance, and composition. He systematically learned harmony, musical forms, orchestration, and more under his teacher, Anton Rubinstein. His studies at the Conservatory significantly enhanced his musical abilities and knowledge, and he began to develop differing opinions from Rubinstein regarding musical ideas and works. Rubinstein wanted him to emulate Mendelssohn, Schumann, and Schubert, but while studying these composers' works, Tchaikovsky became passionate about the creative approaches of Liszt and Berlioz, even incorporating many innovative elements into his arrangements of classical pieces, earning him rebuke from his teacher. Tchaikovsky's graduation piece was the orchestration of "Ode

to Joy”, which received unanimous praise from the examination judges and was awarded a silver medal. However, Rubinstein remained dissatisfied with his orchestration and urged him to make revisions. Nevertheless, Tchaikovsky chose not to alter his work but instead continued creating. Five years later, "Romeo and Juliet" successfully debuted, and Tchaikovsky finally proved himself, thereby embarking on his creative career. The experience of Tchaikovsky's musical education underscores not only his exceptional musical talent but also his unique insights into music and his unwavering commitment to his creative pursuits, which were the primary reasons for his outstanding achievements in music.

Tchaikovsky's creative output can be divided into three periods [5]. The initial period spans from 1866 to 1876, during which he taught music at the Moscow Conservatory. His works from this time exhibit an optimistic spirit and are imbued with a rich sense of life. Drawing inspiration primarily from literary works and Russian folk music, his representative pieces from this period include the Symphony No. 1 in G minor, Op. 13 "Winter Dreams", the Fantasia Overture "Romeo and Juliet," and the ballet "Swan Lake." The middle period ranges from 1878 to 1885. In 1877, he concluded his teaching duties at the Moscow Conservatory and, with the financial support of Nadezhda von Meck, dedicated himself fully to musical composition and performance. His notable works from this period include the "Symphony No. 4", the opera "The Queen of Spades," and "The Maid of Orleans." The final period of Tchaikovsky's creativity extends from 1887 to 1893. This was a highly productive era for him, marked by the emergence of many iconic works, such as the ballets "The Sleeping Beauty" and "The Nutcracker."



anticipatory piece, brimming with Tchaikovsky's distinctively "singing" quality throughout its entirety.

Another defining characteristic of Tchaikovsky's piano compositions lies in the symphonic quality of their harmony. Imitative polyphony and contrastive polyphony are the common creative methods employed by Tchaikovsky to develop melodies. In the second movement of Tchaikovsky's "Piano Concerto No. 2 in G Major," the solos of the violin and cello are of equal importance to the piano. Tchaikovsky mimics the Baroque concerto form [10]. The middle movement of the piece is presented in a trio format. It opens with a string ensemble, with the theme introduced by the solo violin. Subsequently, the solo cello also plays a contrasting theme, and the duet between the violin and cello continues until the piano enters. This approach further highlights the polyphonic nature, seamlessly integrating the symphony with the piano concerto. In the piano solo "Ballade", the melody line in the introduction is played successively by the right and left hands. After the theme appears, the right hand consistently plays the sorrowful melody in the upper voice part, accompanied by intervals and chords in the middle voice part, making it a typical work with polyphonic qualities. As such, Tchaikovsky's compositions embody a dual characteristic of both internationalization and national identity.

3. Analysis of the Nationalist Characteristics in the Piano Suite “The Four Seasons”

3.1. The Creative Background of the Piano Suite "The Four Seasons"

The piano suite "The Four Seasons" was composed during a period of rapid capitalist development in Russia, where the rise of capitalism clashed sharply with the country's serfdom and feudal autocratic system. The struggle for freedom ignited uprisings among the people, which in turn significantly inspired artists. During this tumultuous time, artists used their works to express their yearning for a happy life and to lash out at and express dissatisfaction with the realities of society. The piano suite "The Four Seasons" depicts the beautiful landscapes of Russia, its industrious and simple-hearted people, and the festive scenes of unity and harmony, all of which form a stark contrast with the turbulent social backdrop of Russia at that time. This further embodies the artists' inner longing for freedom and beauty.

During the creation of "The Four Seasons," the composer frequently drew upon the melodies and rhythms of Russian folk songs and dances, resulting in music imbued with national characteristics. Carnival and Christmas, two traditional festivals held in great esteem by the Russian people, are also depicted within the cycle. Through the application of dance rhythms, melodic patterns, and harmonies, Tchaikovsky was able to bring out the unique charm and flavor of national dances.

3.2. The Application of Russian Nationalist Elements in the Piano Suite "The Four Seasons"

"What I express in my creations is shaped by the education and environmental characteristics of the era and country in which I live and work. I have never betrayed myself." —Tchaikovsky, in a letter to Sergei Taneyev on January 14, 1891. This statement illustrates that Tchaikovsky's musical compositions were never detached from the land that nurtured him. While it may seem that we cannot readily identify specific folk songs or dances quoted in his works. Tchaikovsky collected, organized, and synthesized national music while incorporating his creative vision, rather than merely copying it. Consequently, his compositions embody the style of Russian national melodies, with traces of national music evident in harmony, form, and melody. Influenced by the linguistic patterns of Russian folk music, the frequent use of sharp fourths (#4) and flat sevenths (b7) in his works showcases the Russian people's humor and their tendency for linguistic leaps[11]. By incorporating this feature into his musical creations, Tchaikovsky not only adopted it in the modal system but also made extensive use of it in passing tones. This approach makes his music more relatable to life and successfully portrays vivid scenes of Russian daily life.

3.2.1. "The Four Seasons" depicts dazzling natural scenery and colorful people's lives

"The Four Seasons" was composed in 1875 when Tchaikovsky was commissioned by the St. Petersburg musical magazine "Novosti" to create suitable piano solos for each month of the year, accompanied by corresponding poems. These 12 pieces, known for their freshness, liveliness, and beautiful melodies, depict the unique scenic beauty of the Russian landscape and have since become deeply loved by many.



Figure 2. Arpeggios

"January - At the Fire Side" depicts a serene and quiet winter evening, imbued with a warm and peaceful ambiance by the roadside. "At the Fire Side" employs a ternary form structure, A-B-A with a coda. The A section boasts a melodious and song-like tune, evoking feelings of warmth, comfort, and tranquility. The B section shifts into a state of contemplation, allowing for free-flowing imagination. As the music progresses, it modulates from E minor to B major, with emotions escalating and becoming harder to contain, as if awakening from a melancholy state into a gradually brighter and more cheerful mood. The coda returns to the main theme. The overall musical palette carries a subtle hint of melancholy. The flames in the fireplace are about to die out under the gentle breeze, and the candle flames on the table dance with the wind. To create the atmosphere of a hazy, mystical night at the beginning of the piece, the composer employs a series of arpeggios. When playing the arpeggios, clarity and continuity are crucial, with the dynamics gradually increasing from soft to strong (Figure 2).

"February - Carnival." Carnival is a traditional festival in Russia, where people attend in grand costumes, hold lavish feasts, dance and sing their hearts out, giving thanks to God for his blessings. "Carnival" is composed in the form of a rondo, which is characterized by its clear structural form, diverse melodies and rhythms, as well as contrast and echo, making it suitable for expressing joyous scenes. The lively rhythms and bouncy melodies, coupled with the simplicity and liveliness of the two-beat dance, portray the bustling festive atmosphere, imbued with a distinctively Russian folk music style. The music also reflects the generous and optimistic personality traits of the Russian people. The piece repeats the presentation section twice, extending the musical theme continuously, which not only enhances the festive atmosphere but also enriches the thematic ideas while maintaining consistency with the emotional tone and style of the theme. The musical structure follows the pattern of A-B-A-C-A (Figure 3).



Figure 3. February-Carnival

"March-Song of the Lark" depicts the joyous play of skylarks, as if bringing news of spring. The gradually accelerating music adds a touch of vivacity to the melody, while the decorations that appear make the image of the skylark even more vivid and lifelike. This section is structured as a ternary form, A-B-A. The A section portrays the skylarks happily and carefreely playing on the branches. The B section speeds up, further enhancing the image of the skylark, and the decorations add to the lively atmosphere. The piece concludes with a return to the main theme (Figure 4).



Figure 4. March-Song of the Lark

"April – Snow Drop" has a leisurely thematic rhythm and a gentle mood, conveying the yearning and dreaminess of early spring. It also portrays the snow drop, a flower that fearlessly endures the harsh cold and blossoms in early spring when snow still covers the earth, praising its tenacious vitality. The snow drop is a symbol of hope, much like the perseverance and fighting spirit displayed by the Russian people in their quest for freedom. This section follows the musical form of A-B-A. The first section unfolds with gentle music as if the snow drops are breaking through the snow cover, just emerging from the soil and basking in the sunshine. The second section features a light and elegant melody, with grace notes and repeated musical phrases that express the snow drop's resilience and unyielding vitality in the face of severe cold. The third section gradually fades away, as if the people have slowly walked away (Figure 1).



Figure 5. April-Snow Drop

"May—White Nights." In Russia, May brings about the phenomenon of twilight merging into dawn, which is known as the White Nights. On this day, people wear festive attire and flock out of their homes to celebrate the once-a-year White Nights according to Russian customs. This piece of music initially captures the languidness and fantasy of a spring night, which then evolves into expressions of joy and elevated emotions during the festivities. The musical form follows a ternary structure of A-B-A. The A section sounds somewhat like a sigh, evoking the stillness of the White Nights, with a melancholic and lonely melody tinged with a dreamy hue and yearning for a better life. The B section begins to stir with excitement and energy, gradually building up to a climax of joy. The final section repeats the A section, with the intense emotions subsiding into tranquility, returning from the joyous fantasy back to the serene White Nights (Figure 1).



Figure 6. May-White Nights

"June - Barcarolle." June is considered the finest season in Russia, and the composer has composed this widely popular and enchanting piece using melodies imbued with Russian folk style, characterized by their elegance and tranquility. "June - Barcarolle" is a ternary structure. The first and last sections depict the serene lake and the leisurely boatman, setting the tone for the entire piece as leisurely and delightful. The middle section contrasts with the first and last, emphasizing a more dynamic melody as if the boatman is splashing in the water. In addition to the main melody of the first section, another melody is introduced in the bass. It's like two boatmen singing a duet. The music gradually fades out at the end, as if the boat is drifting further away and slowly disappearing (Figure 7).



Figure 7. June-Barcarolle

"July - Song of the Reapers." This piece depicts the scene of farmers laboring during the haymaking season. The entire composition exudes vitality and joy, capturing the simple life of the peasants through melodies reminiscent of folk songs, unadorned and genuine. Structured in three parts, the first section portrays farmers wielding their sickles as they work, embodying the bold and cheerful character of the Russian people. The second section bursts with energy and vitality, showcasing the laboring people's love for work and their joyful embrace of life. The third section reprises the first, with the triplet in the left hand tightening the rhythm, conveying the soaring enthusiasm of the working people (Figure 8).



Figure 8. July-Song of the Reapers

"August - Harvest." August is the season of reaping, and this piece captures the scenes of harvest and the exhilaration of the people. The composition follows a ternary form structured as A-B-A. The A sections (the first section and recapitulation) feature melodies that are warm, unrestrained, and passionate, filled with vitality and energy, portraying the joyous scenes of farmers celebrating the bountiful harvest. The B section contrasts with the first section, featuring a slower tempo and softer dynamics, as if the people are taking a rest in the fields. The music frequently employs weak beats to emphasize the dynamic quality and vivid portrayal of labor scenes (Figure 9).



Figure 9. August-Harvest

"September-The Hunting " portrays a vivid scene of people getting ready for a hunt. The composition follows a ternary form structured as A-B-A. The A section is characterized by a strong sense of rhythm, conveying a soaring mood of excitement. The B section, adopting a march-like style, showcases the hunters' vigilance and the escalating emotions of the people, painting a grand picture of a vast hunting procession advancing with great momentum. The recapitulation depicts the hunters returning victorious with their trophies (Figure 10).



Figure 10. September-The Hunting

"October-Autumn Song" embodies the author's melancholic, solitary, and serene personality traits into this composition, lending an overall depressive and somber tone that accentuates the desolate ambiance of autumn. It expresses the author's profound affection and nostalgia for the season. The composition follows a ternary form structured as A-B-A. The A section carries a hint of desolation in its melody, painting a picture of withered leaves and fading flowers in autumn. The B section, on the other hand, features a melodious and poignant tune that unfolds the author's sentiments of sadness and loneliness (Figure 11).



Figure 11. October-Autumn Song

"November - Troika" captures the vibrant scene of a speeding sleigh across the vast, snow-covered Russian steppe, where the crunch of snow beneath the horses' hooves mingles with the lively jingle of bells and joyous singing, echoing towards the distant horizon. Composed in a ternary form structured as A-B-A. The A section boasts a bright and enchanting melody, embodying the joy, anticipation, and longing felt by those hurrying along on the sleigh. The B section transitions into a more lively and exuberant mood, with the crisp ringing of bells resonating in the ears. Yet beneath this carefree cheer, there seems to linger a subtle melancholy from the composer, subtly imbuing the winter scene with a touch of solitude. (Figure 12).



Figure 12. November-Troika

"December - Christmas" portrays a lively and joyous scene as people eagerly embrace the festivities of Christmas. The piece employs a rondo form, structured as A-B-A-C-A-B. The A section is a waltz, characterized by a smooth and steady rhythm that is inherently singable, capturing the scene of people joyously singing and dancing as they celebrate Christmas. The B section introduces a more compact musical rhythm, reflecting the escalating excitement and fervor as people continue to dance and spin amidst the festive atmosphere. The C section shifts from the key of bA major to E major, bringing about a sense of calm, as if the dancers are exchanging greetings, blessings, and shared aspirations for an even better year ahead. The coda concludes the piece with a light-hearted and bright melody (Figure 13).



Figure 13. December—Christmas

The piano suite "The Four Seasons" draws inspiration from the daily life and seasons throughout the year in Russia, painting a vivid picture of the country's natural landscapes, people's colorful lives, and folk customs. Among the depictions of natural scenery are "March-Song of the Lark", "April-Snow Drops", "May-The White Nights", "June-Barcarolle", and "October -Autumn Song". Scenes of people's lives are portrayed in "January - at the Fireside", "July - The Song of the Reapers", "August - Harvest", "September - The Hunt", and "November - Troika". Festival and custom celebrations are featured in "February - Carnival" and "December - Christmas". Listening to the 12 musical compositions in "The Four Seasons," one can always appreciate the unique polyphonic music, deeply moved by the rich, profound, simple, and sincere emotions. Tchaikovsky's polyphonic texture in his music embodies national style, revealing the influence of Russian folk polyphony. In Russian folk singing, there are unaccompanied mixed choruses, where one person leads the singing, followed by male and female voices in harmony. As Russian national music evolved, polyphony gradually became an inherent characteristic of national musical forms. While inheriting this national technique, Tchaikovsky creatively applied it in conjunction with the musical themes and ideological connotations.

3.2.2. Utilizing the Rhythm Patterns of Russian Folk Dances

The Russian people live on vast lands, and the harsh natural climate has forged their resilient and bold personalities. They dance during celebrations, labor, and harvest times, integrating dance and music into their daily lives. In a letter to Nadezhda von Meck, Tchaikovsky wrote, "... No matter how much I appreciate Italy, no matter how favorable an impression it now makes on me, I shall always remain faithful to Russia... I love the Russian people, the Russian language, Russian wisdom, the beauty of Russian faces, Russian customs..." Tchaikovsky had a profound love for his nation, and therefore infused his feelings into his creations.

In "February- Carnival," the composer draws inspiration from Russian festivals, incorporating the themes and forms of folk dances into the musical expression [12]. The allegro rhythm in 2/4 time, with repeated block chords with melodic leaps, resembles the drumbeat accompaniment at a ball, evoking images of people joyfully dancing to the rhythm of the music. In "April – Snow Drops," the composer adopts a fixed dance rhythm in 6/8 time and block chord patterns to express people's joy at the arrival of spring and the rejuvenation of all things. In "December - Christmas," the composer employs the rhythm of a waltz to heighten the festive atmosphere of Christmas. The 3/4 time waltz format portrays people celebrating the holiday.

4. Conclusion

Tchaikovsky was one of Russia's renowned musicians and also a globally celebrated figure in music. He lived during a time when Romanticism and Nationalism intertwined in music. His music inherited the achievements of Russian music since Glinka, while creatively drawing upon the musical achievements of the Western European Classical and Romantic schools. He incorporated more Russian folk melodies, striving to reflect universal human emotions and thoughts in his music, earning him immense popularity among a wide audience.

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