

Discussing the Ethnicity of Tchaikovsky's 1812 Overture through the Professional Lens of Musicology

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Abstract: The scope of my dissertation is: the sections of the 1812 Overture that are characterized by Russian folk music; the connection between the Russo-French War of 1812 and the 1812 Overture; and the composer Tchaikovsky's inspiration and compositional process for writing the 1812 Overture. The purpose of the research is: to discuss the embodiment of Russian musical style in the 1812 Overture through the knowledge and understanding of folk music. In the process of writing the article, the first step is to listen to the audio of the 1812 Overture, watch the video of the 1812 Overture, and find out the characteristic passages of Russian music and the use of characteristic instruments in the video of the 1812 Overture, and combine them with the same passages in the score of the 1812 Overture. Next, collect literature on the 1812 Overture, Tchaikovsky, Russian folk music, and definitions of folk music. And begin to organize the framework of the thesis and categories the literature. Finally write the paper, revise the final draft and submit the course paper. The result is a discussion and critical response to the reasons for the controversy of the Russian national music of the composer Tchaikovsky by the people of Russia itself by analyzing the national character of the 1812 Overture. The conclusion is that the 1812 Overture is a strong confirmation of the composer Tchaikovsky's expertise in using not only Western European symphonic music, but also Russian musical styles in his musical compositions.

Keywords: 1812 Overture; Ethnographic; Tchaikovsky.

1. Introduction

Tchaikovsky was a 19th-century composer of the Romantic school and his musical output encompassed almost all musical genres. One of the symphonies whose popularity bears the title of Romantic 'Beethoven'. For example, the *Nutcracker* and the *Symphony of Pathos* are so beloved that they have survived to the modern times. As a Russian composer, Tchaikovsky's works are not only in the national style of Russian music but also in the tradition of European music culture [1]. The 1812 *Overture* referred to in this article is an instrument that reflects the native spirit of the Russian nation. Tchaikovsky also used some characteristic instruments to perform the piece.

This paper will discuss the ethnicity of the 1812 *Overture* and the ethnographic character of the piece is supported by musicological expertise such as musical background and musical style.

2. Organization of the Text

Nationalist music preaches competition for a piece of land or a country's culture, politics, economy etc. The ownership of music represents the ownership of land and is just as important in nature. Why can Tchaikovsky's 1812 *Overture* be classified as folk music? Because it depicts the entire battle of the Franco-Russian War of 1812, in which the Russian people were victorious. The music thus represents the Russian national culture and fits the definition of folk music. It is from this that a discussion of the ethnicity of this music can be developed [2].

Music changed from the Viennese classical school to the Romantic school from the end of the eighteenth century to the beginning of the nineteenth century. This period also saw the emergence of composers from different countries and the diversification of musical styles with national overtones.

Wagner and Brahms in Germany, Schubert in Vienna and Tchaikovsky in Russia were among the composers who represented different countries during this period. By the nineteenth century, 'national music' ruled the period. During this period, symphonic music gradually became the expression of folk music. Symphonic music developed significantly even it does not have the same tableaux and scenes as opera during the Romantic period. Composers were represented such as Berlioz, Schubert and Tchaikovsky. Musicians would also add ethnic elements to their symphonies to express the characteristics of ethnic music such as ethnic songs or ethnic poetry [3]. Their works reflect the history of their own nation and the life of their people with a strong spirit of patriotism and deep national feeling. At the same time, they make extensive use of folk music materials in their works which have a distinctive national style.

The emergence of the national music school in 19th century Europe: The national music school emerged under the historical conditions of the unprecedented rise of national and democratic movements in Northeast Europe. Progressive artists and writers strongly demanded freedom from the domination of foreign culture as the people became more nationally conscious and democratic. Composers were influenced by Western European Romanticism and Critical Realism established a modern national culture in their own countries [4]. Among them were musicians dedicated to the revival of folk music. They created folk opera houses, music academies and music societies in order to collect and study folk music. They were able to establish their own modern professional music by working to create works with a distinctive national character. They also sought to change the dominance of Western European music in their country and the backwardness of the suppressed development of folk music.

The golden age of Russian music in the Romantic period began in the 1830s. This people have a tradition of singing

and dancing from ancient times and have a rich treasure of folk music. Glinka was a Russian composer and the "father of Russian music". His works include the opera *Ivan Sussanin* and the orchestral *Kamalin'skaya Fantasy* [5]. He drew on Russian folk music to create music that expressed the life of the Russian people. He also drew inspiration from Russian urban music culture and drew heavily on the music of the classical and Romantic periods in Western Europe. This brought Russian music to a new level. The Strong Group is also known as the New Russian School and are also the guardians of Russian national music. They are represented by Borodin, Glinka, Balakirev, Mussorgsky, Rimsky-Korsakov. Absolutely, five of these composers admired Glinka. They love Russian folk music and strive to give their compositions a distinctly national character. Not only did they focus on the close connection between music and literature, drama, poetry and art, but they also expanded and enriched the expressive power of music by contrasting and depicting exotic and Russian styles [6].

In short, these composers adopted the subject matter content of the nation in their compositions. It can be seen that they depict the customs and historical events of the nation, embodying its character, aspirations and spirit through these musicians' compositions. They have greatly contributed to the spread of the musical culture of their people and have effectively promoted the development of their music [7].

Russia was divided into two schools of musical composition in the 19th century. The first was the nationalist school and the second was the Slavonic school. The Strong Group is a representative figure. These composers took the development of local music seriously and followed the route of title music. The other school is the Westernisation school. The Rubinstein brothers were the Tchaikovsky's teachers and they adhered to the classical style of Western Europe. Tchaikovsky was systematically trained in Western European compositional techniques as he initially studied at the St. Petersburg Conservatory founded by Rubinstein [8]. This is why the Western European style of composition is so clearly evident in his work and this is why some people have said that Tchaikovsky's compositions are foreign. It is easy to see the importance he attached to the Russian national language if we take a closer look at Tchaikovsky's work. His works are loved by people all over the world, including Russia because of the perfect combination of Western European compositional techniques and Russian folk music.

The third movement of Tchaikovsky's *Symphony No. 4 in F minor* and it composed between 1877 and 1878. This parody features a scene in which a peasant, drunk, sings a market song and played by woodwind instruments to the tune of a Russian peasant dance. The most obvious use of folk music elements in his work is his *Slavonic March* of 1876. The various themes in it have a Russian flavour [9]. Several themes are strung together and interwoven to drive the work forward. Russian folk melodies are also used in the masquerade scene of Act II, Scene 1 of his opera *The Queen of Spades*. Throughout his many musical works, Tchaikovsky's love of his own musical culture is reflected, and this love directly forms the national complex in his musical compositions. Tchaikovsky developed a love of his own musical culture in his many musical works. This love directly formed the national complex in his musical works [10].

In 1840 Tchaikovsky was born into a family of mining engineers. In 1859, Tchaikovsky entered the Ministry of

Justice after graduating from the Petersburg Law School. And he studied composition at the music study course of the Russian Music Society in 1861. In 1865, he taught at the Moscow Conservatory, where he also became active in music composition. From then on Tchaikovsky's musical talent emerged in this way. His first representative works appeared afterwards. Tchaikovsky was free from financial pressure and burden with the financial support of his wealthy widow Mrs. Meck. In 1877, he resigned from his teaching job to concentrate on composing. At the end of 1893, he conducted the first performance of the *Symphony of Pathos* in Petersburg and it was also a success for Tchaikovsky [11]. In November of the same year, the great musician died tragically. Tchaikovsky's life is rich in musical works. Among his most representative are the *Symphony No.4*, *Symphony No.5* and *Symphony No.6*, the opera *Evgeny Onegin*, *The Queen of Spades*, the dance drama *Swan Lake*, *The Sleeping Beauty* and *The Nutcracker*. Tchaikovsky's works are imbued with deep emotions which stem from social reality and his own experiences. What he poured into his music was his truth and honesty which made his music extremely compelling. To explore these emotions, one needs to understand the master musician who created such masterful cultural masterpieces [12]. Learn about Tchaikovsky's musical life and feel the fascination of his music through history and time. Tchaikovsky lived at a time of extraordinary social tension and conflict in Russia. Also he grew up with a deep sense of the sadness of Russian society. Hearing the heartbreaking fishing songs of the exploited and oppressed serfs outside his window in his home in the Urals often made sleep difficult for the Tchaikovsky of his childhood [13]. Indeed, these fishing songs lie a painful history. Serfdom in Russia was brutal. Tchaikovsky wrote his poetry with this sadness which expressed his patriotic feelings in a naive and sentimentalist manner. This sentimentality influenced Tchaikovsky from his childhood and it continued throughout his life. It also shaped his emotional, thoughtful and sensitive character. This character made his emotional reaction to the same event always much stronger than that of other children.

The melancholy, sentimental, sentimental and sensitive qualities of Tchaikovsky's character did not prevent him from aspiring to a better life and the pursuit of ideal love. These delicate emotions and the pursuit of truth and beauty became a source of inspiration for his music. As a result, Tchaikovsky's music is always lyrical and has become an important style in his work. His lyrical works are often highly subjective in nature and are confessions of his emotional experiences. He incorporates his own emotions, life experiences and reflections on life into his works [14].

The musical form of the classical school of music had always been a favourite of Tchaikovsky's and he was a great supporter of the idea of title music. Tchaikovsky's operas and ballets are based on this idea and the melodies of the music are thus perfectly integrated into the characters. Tchaikovsky experienced many unfortunate events in his life such as the death of friends and relatives and a painful marriage. These undoubtedly caused great trauma to his soul and left him in a deep mire of mental anguish from which he could not extricate himself. Tchaikovsky wrote in his diary on 16 March 1887: "I can't hide from myself that I have for some reason practically finished all the poetry I had lived in the countryside and in solitude. As soon as I do not work, I am bitter and fearful of the future." A few days later, he wrote: "I am still restless, melancholy, bored and sometimes even

afraid." He made this confession in a letter to Mrs. Meck: "I have developed a weariness of life, a melancholy indifference, as if I were soon to die, and this feeling of impending doom has rendered everything important in my own life insignificant and worthless." In addition to his personal experiences, the Russia of Tchaikovsky's time accumulated various social contradictions [15]. His empirical awareness of these realities often led him to the intersection of various contradictions in the social, intellectual and cultural art spheres as well as in his personal life. It was in this state of repression and confusion, hope and disappointment, confidence and inferiority, motivation and depression that Tchaikovsky tossed and turned, falling into pain, sadness and even despair. Tchaikovsky's state of mind was also representative of the prevailing state of mind of many Russians of his time and this is one of the features of his work that attracts particular attention. In his music he idealised all the beautiful things he saw in real life and gave them the most sincere, beautiful, affectionate and touching musical images. At the same time, he embodies in an infinite number of ways the contradictory elements that cause him psychological pain and make him feel afraid and incomprehensible. The music of the artist is a very powerful and moving image. Tchaikovsky lived his life through music. Music became not only his state of being and his way of writing but also the transcendence of his spiritual thought and the completion of his artistic career [16]. Tchaikovsky's music not only expresses the pathos of Russian national history but also leaves a valuable cultural heritage and spiritual treasure for all mankind. It also contributes to the timeless value and charm of his music.

In 1812 AD, Napoleon launched an attack on Russia on the pretext that the then Russian Tsar Alexander I had broken the Peace of Tilsit [17]. In the early summer of 1812, Napoleon suddenly invaded Russia with an army of 1.2 million men without any notice. The French army advanced eastwards in overwhelming strength until it reached Moscow where the famous Battle of Borodino was fought on 7 September. On 14 September, Kutuzov was forced to abandon Moscow to save his troops. The Russians then took Moscow and pursued the French until they were destroyed. Napoleon lost 570,000 troops and all his cavalry and artillery. But more importantly the war was a devastating blow to Napoleon's attempts to establish a new political system in Europe. Although this piece is known as the *1812 Overture*, it belongs strictly to the category of title music. This is because it has a literary and descriptive title and a more specific expressive content [18]. Overtures were originally the opening music for operas, ballets or oratorios. Since the 19th century, composers have often used this genre to write independent orchestral works. Most are in sonata form and have titles. *1812 Overture* is an independent, contented orchestral work.

The structure of the *1812 Overture* is in sonata form. It begins with an expansive, slow introduction. The introduction is a religious song which played in six parts by the viola and cello. This slow, solemn and mournful beginning is a prayer for God's blessing. Then the strings and woodwinds intersperse with the sound of horns and shouts, evoking images of war and people fighting against the enemy to protect their families (see Figure 1) [19].

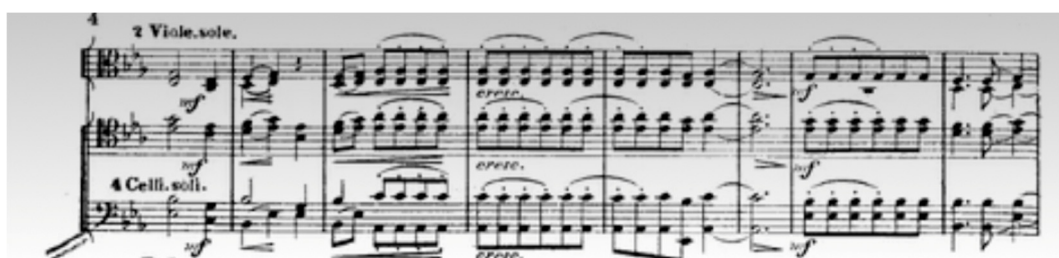


Figure 1. The Crowd Chant of 1812 Overture

A solemn call to arms is given by the tuba and bass strings. The second theme of the introduction is a cavalry theme for

woodwinds and French horns which underlines the image of the soldier who answers the call to arms (see Figure 2).



Figure 2. The Second theme of the secondary section of 1812 Overture

The presentation gives the piece a dramatic character and is structured in three parts [20]. It is in the key of E flat minor. Tchaikovsky used to subdivide the main theme of his works

into three parts: presentation, development and recapitulation. A fragment of the Marseillaise tune appears in the development passage of the main theme (see Figure 3).



Figure 3. The Marseillaise of 1812 Overture

Its repeated presentation is used as a symbol of the invasion of Russia by the violent Napoleonic army. The *Marseillaise* is like a confrontation and battle between two armies, Russian and French, through its derivation and interweaving with the main part of the musical elements. The secondary themes are two Russian themes that differ from the *Marseillaise* theme. The opening section is based on the main theme like a battle between the two themes of the main section and the melodic fragments of the *Marseillaise*. The battle is fought once more and the drums and cymbals merge into a thrilling cannonade that continues with great force into the recapitulation section. The recapitulation remains dominated by the main theme and the secondary themes are not adequately recapitulated [21]. As the patriotic army triumphs, the hoarse Marseillaise is linked to a rapidly descending phrase simultaneously symbolising the rout of the French.

The finale begins with the first theme from the introduction. The congregational hymn brings together all the instruments, bells and salutes into one glorious collective [22]. The cavalry theme reappears and the grand spectacle of a nation celebrating its victory is expressed in music that rings out like thunder. The piece ends with the solemn and majestic final chorus of Gloria from Glinka's opera *Ivan Sussanen* (see Figure 4).

Changed to *Glory Ode* by Glazunov after the October Revolution. People sang and celebrated their victory in a festive atmosphere.

Tchaikovsky was a passionate patriot who loved everything about Russia and all his works are full of patriotic ideas and feelings. It was this passionate love for his country and the Russian people that prompted him to delve into Russian folk songs and to imprint his works with the Russian stamp [23].

The artist is not independent of society but always lives within a certain nationality and social life. Artists from different countries and regions always have the imprint of a certain time, a certain country and a certain nationality. His works must reflect a certain period, country... and nationality.

Tchaikovsky's *1812 Overture* is characterised by the Romantic school of composition but more distinctively by his national character. Beethoven also stated that Tchaikovsky's *1812 Overture* was one of his favourite symphonies [24].



Figure 4. The Glorious Ode of Glinka

There is a wide range of opinion and criticism of Tchaikovsky's music. Some consider his music to be too 'Asian' now while others point out that his syntax and genre are 'Western European'. Although Tchaikovsky inherited the traditional style and spirit of Western European composition, his choice of literary texts and use of ethno-musical elements and his reflections on the future destiny of his country's people became a good example of his music [25].

In the context of the Romantic period, it was impractical to create music that left behind Romantic compositional techniques. The fusion of Western European compositional techniques with folk music began with Glinka and musicians have made this practice a fundamental requirement of their compositions until now [26]. They began to emulate the folk music written by Glinka, as did Tchaikovsky. His seven symphonies are based on the technique of Anton Rubinstein and employ a distinctly folk melodic approach or the form of title music. The expression of the native Russian national flavour and style. In other genres, he also creatively combines the compositional techniques of the Western European Romantic school with Russian folk music. This diversified the themes and artistic forms of the music, leaving a legacy of immortal classics for Russia and future generations. From these characteristics, the Russian folk music school is most inseparable from Russia's own folk music and urban song and dance culture. The Russian folk school combined its classical and romantic compositional techniques with those of Western Europe under the leadership of Glinka and developed by other musicians such as Tchaikovsky. The musicians of the Russian national school have also left many monumental works to the history of music. Russian musicians combine compositional techniques in their musical works to form a unique national artistic language. These works also emphasise the demands of their national liberation and highlight the role of the Russian folk music genre in the development of the times. In terms of artistic style they enrich the whole of European music [27].

Tchaikovsky was one of the more individual musicians in

the Russian folk genre. While promoting his own musical culture, he also incorporated musical styles and materials from other peoples. For example, the dance drama *The Nutcracker* includes dance music from Spain, Arabia and China. He drew on the strengths of each ethnic group to develop his own style. His operatic works are characterized by delicate psychological descriptions [28]. Other operatic works are characterized by lyricism and tragedy. Drama was also a striking musical force for Tchaikovsky. Transformed by his artistic language, he expressed his inner experience of social contradictions in his musical works. Tchaikovsky also compared and contrasted the good and the evil, the pain and the joy, the light and the darkness of life. A small number of his piano works also make full use of musical material and compositional techniques in the Russian folk style, fully depicting the social reality of his people. He also distils the essence of his own music, reflecting Tchaikovsky's inner emotional world. In all these respects Tchaikovsky's music is distinctly unique [29].

Aesthetics is also one of the fundamental characteristics of art. From the point of view of artistic production, any work of art must have the following two conditions: firstly, it must be the product of human artistic production; secondly, it must have aesthetic value, i.e. be aesthetic in nature. It is these two things that distinguish works of art from some other non-works of art. There is no denying that the *1812 Overture* is a product of Tchaikovsky's artistic production. How then does its aesthetic nature come into play? From an aesthetic point of view, there are two forms of beauty, natural beauty and artistic beauty. The difference between the two of them lies in the fact that artistic beauty directly unites the crystallization of human labour and wisdom. In the *1812 Overture*, the composer's aesthetic sense is reflected in his desire for freedom and peace [30]. At the same time, his love is also evident for his country and his hatred of aggressive warfare. It is also a concentrated expression of the feelings of the Russian people at the time. The aesthetic quality of the piece is also reflected in the fact

that the composer brings together the truth, goodness and beauty of real life into a work of art. The truth in a work of art is not directly equivalent to the truth of real life but is refined by the artist through creative activity. In the *1812 Overture*, the composer draws on the experience of the Russo-French War of 1812. It depicts the quiet peace that preceded the war, the preparations for the war, the start of the war on both sides and the eventual victory of the war. The composer does not confine himself to the life of the war but uses the general context of its development to express the Russian people's desire to defend themselves against foreign enemies and hope for peace. The composer uses his skillful composing technique to make the whole piece have its ups and downs and climaxes and the artistic image is vivid and realistic. It is also with high artistic level and aesthetic value [31].

According to our analysis above, the *1812 Overture* is indeed very poor in terms of artistic merit. But most people still adore the *1812 Overture*. Frankly speaking, the *1812 Overture* also leaves us with a powerful impression. But when we think about it, the *1812 Overture* is like a building on the one hand like the Great Wall of China. When we analyse and appreciate the Great Wall brick by brick and step by step, we will find it very ordinary. Even the ordinary that it has no artistic value. But we are overwhelmed by its scale and danger when we look at this world heritage site that built by ordinary people. That is the beauty of the Great Wall. It is the immensity of the *1812 Overture* and its use of the unprecedented acoustics of salutes and bells in its music and the historical facts it carries. This perhaps became the meaning of what people fell in love with him for. Perhaps the success of the *1812 Overture* lies in its unprecedented historical nature but its artistic value is very brief. On the whole, the *1812 Overture* is an unadorned blend of the composer's life, background and compositional style. This work has a direct impact on our understanding of Tchaikovsky and his music, as well as on the history of Russia. The composer himself made people proud of the *1812 Overture* through his work and his ability to grasp and manipulate the style of the work. It is due to Tchaikovsky's unusual life experiences and personality that the *1812 Overture* still surprises us today. So, whatever the artistic value and assessment of Tchaikovsky and the *1812 Overture* may be today. The *1812 Overture* is indeed an important and glorious piece of Tchaikovsky's creative career.

In the *1812 Overture*, Tchaikovsky's aesthetic sense is reflected in his desire for freedom and a happy life. It also reflects his love for his country and his hatred of the war of aggression. It is also a concentrated expression of the emotions of the Russian people of the time. The aesthetic quality of this work is also reflected in the way in which the composer brings together the truth, goodness and beauty of real life into a work of art. The truth in a work of art is not directly equivalent to the truth in real life but is distilled by the artist through his creative activity. In the *1812 Overture*, the composer depicts the quiet peace before the war and the preparations for war by drawing on the experience of the Russo-French War of 1812. It also describes the beginning of the war on both sides and the eventual victory of the war. Although the composer does not confine himself to the life of the war, he uses the context of its development to express the feelings of the Russian people as they defend their country against foreign enemies and hope for peace. The composer uses his compositional skills to bring the work to a climactic climax and a vivid and realistic artistic image.

3. Conclusion

In conclusion, the *1812 Overture* is an unadorned blend of the composer's life, background and compositional style. It has a direct impact on and contributes greatly to our understanding of Tchaikovsky and his music as well as to the history of Russia. The war between Russia and France is one of the most important aspects of Russian history and culture. It is clear from this that the *1812 Overture* is a reminder of the Russo-French War if the listener has listened to it attentively. To a certain extent, it is also one of the jewels of Russian music. It deserves to be remembered by the Russian people and can be considered a symbol of the great national music of Russian culture. What is more important is that the *1812 Overture* evokes strong patriotic feelings and deep national cultural resonance in the Russian people that is also unique to the national character of the *1812 Overture*. Therefore, musical works that make use of Western thinking are not necessarily not good folk music and the *1812 Overture* gives us an opportunity to reflect on our perception of folk music. In other words, the *1812 Overture* to the Franco-Russian War is a depiction of a battle whose national culture is deeply rooted in the hearts and minds of the Russian people and is truly Russian folk music. The exploration of the national character of the *1812 Overture* leads us to think more deeply about national music. If a piece of folk music does not resonate with its own people, does it still have a national meaning? From this paper we can conclude that good folk music should not only reflect the culture and economy of a country but also resonate with the people of that country. Both are crucial to the ethnicity of music.

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