

PYOTR ILYICH TCHAIKOVSKY

Gay Russian Classical Composer

(1840-1893)



Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky was raised in a society that offered no public music education. In spite of his aptitude for music, his parents sent him to a boarding school to be trained for civil service employment. After graduation, he pursued studies in musical composition at Saint Petersburg Conservatory, where the formal, Western-oriented training he received set him apart from other contemporary young Russian composers. After graduating in 1865, he was invited to teach composition at the newly established Conservatoire in Moscow. There he came under the scrutiny of “The Five” – a group, led by Mily Balakirev, who championed a Russian-centric style of composition. It was Balakirev who suggested that Tchaikovsky compose an overture based on the love story of Romeo and Juliet. Drawing upon his own tragic love for one of his male students who had committed suicide, he produced what would become his first recognized masterpiece: *Romeo and Juliet* (1869). This complicated sequence of emotional connections and musical creations would repeat itself numerous times throughout his life to produce such immortal classics as *Swan Lake* (1876); *The Nutcracker* (1892); the *1812 Overture* (1880); *Sleeping Beauty*, (1889); and ten operas including *Eugene Onegin*. Tchaikovsky’s glorious achievements, which made him famous in both Russia and America, were honored by Tsar Alexander III, who awarded him a lifetime pension in 1885 in spite of the rumors that persisted after the failure of his brief marriage in 1877. The enigma and torment behind his genius would deepen when, nine days after conducting his final creation – the Symphony No. 6, *Pathétique* – the great composer was found dead at the age of 53. Suicide was asserted by the authorities; but historians have since rejected this assumption – leaving the circumstances of his death shrouded in mystery. Today Russia refuses to acknowledge Tchaikovsky’s homosexuality in spite of the fact that his own writings reveal he lived in constant fear of his great secret being discovered. In the end – even though his work was often dismissed by critics in his own time as “too Russian for great Western music and not Russian enough for Russia” – Tchaikovsky’s symphonies are played more often than those of any other classical composer. His world-wide recognition has few rivals.



Lesson Plan

Level 1: Contributions Approach

1. Activate prior experience: What do you know about Tchaikovsky, the Russian composer?
2. Read the biographical information above.
3. Group Discussion: What was Tchaikovsky’s original career focus?
4. How did he come to study music at the Saint Petersburg Conservatory?
5. Extend knowledge: What influences helped Tchaikovsky to remain committed to Russian music composition but also to absorb Western influences?
6. What was his first recognized masterpiece hit”?

Level 2: Additive Approach

1. What conflicts did Tchaikovsky navigate in his professional and personal life? Use this link at <http://rictornorton.co.uk/tchaikov.htm>
2. In what way did Tchaikovsky share prominence with other Russian musicians? See link at <http://russiapedia.rt.com/prominent-russians/music/pyotr-tchaikovsky/>
3. Website investigation: Search “Music” contributions at <https://legacyprojectchicago.org/explore/advanced>. Describe any common elements that other LGBTQ music professionals in history share with Tchaikovsky.

Level 3: Transformational Approach

1. There were many “wanderings” where Tchaikovsky had to come to terms with his own professional career and personal life. View http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pyotr_Ilyich_Tchaikovsky and describe an area relevant to understanding his goals.
2. There was a wide range of creativity in his musical endeavors. Describe one of the following: melody, rhythm, harmony, repetition, and structure. How did his distinctive style of Russian composition impact the world of music?
3. From what you have learned about Tchaikovsky’s life, how did his personal experiences influence his musical compositions? Explore <http://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/music/features/opera-sheds-new-light-on-tchaikovskys-gay-lifestyle-1818839.html>

Level 4: Social Action Approach

1. Tchaikovsky’s personality was complicated by depression and his fear of recognition. Read <https://www.thefamouspeople.com/profiles/pyotr-ilyich-tchaikovsky-398.php> and describe the stigma that was part of his society.
2. In what ways would you advocate for historical accuracy in the way LGBTQ individuals like Tchaikovsky are treated in society today?