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Tchaikovsky: His Life and Music
Jeremy Siepmann
Naxos Books
978-1-84379-119-5
(August 31, 2007)

The musical works of Russian composer Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky have woven their way into the fabric of Western culture over the past 100 years.

The 1812 Overture, with its booming cannon passages, is a standard during Fourth of July celebrations. The *Nutcracker* has become a must-hear during the Christmas holidays. And ballet aficionados welcome performances of *Sleeping Beauty* and *Swan Lake* any time of the year. But knowledge of the complex composer is too often limited to the brief biography on the back of a printed program.

Tchaikovsky deserves study, and Siepmann has created a pleasing classroom in the form a biography. Complementing the text are two audio CDs with more than two-and-a-half hours of Tchaikovsky's music, as well as Web access to more. Readers are encouraged to listen to a particular passage of music when reaching a certain point in the biography as a way of better understanding that stage of the composer's life.

But understanding Tchaikovsky is not a simple matter, the author emphasizes. "In few composers and still fewer great composers, has the unity of the life and the music been more blatantly, or more defenselessly, obvious," he writes. "As a man, Tchaikovsky could be devious, insincere and two-faced, though seldom, if ever, malicious. As a musician he was as honest as they come."

The author guides the reader through Tchaikovsky's labyrinthine life with each chapter representing a particular landmark. The chapter "Celebrity and Crisis 1876—1877" addresses the mental anguish Tchaikovsky, having gained a name for himself as a composer, experienced as he came to acknowledge his homosexuality, and just as he impulsively married a woman. The marriage is short-lived. The chapter "House, Home and Happiness 1885-1888" describes Tchaikovsky's positive change in demeanor as he moved to a house in the country. There, amidst nature, he could approach his compositions in a more tranquil setting. Tchaikovsky writes: "My life here has already settled into a steady, regular pattern."

The author's presentation of Tchaikovsky as a person and artist using research, letters,

journals, photography, and audio make this biography a pleasure on as many different levels. The book is part of a series from Naxos Books, which uses words and music to provide a multimedia experience in publishing.

Karl Kunkel