

**Expressing the Inexpressible:  
Tchaikovsky's Symphony No. 5 as  
Inner-Narrative**

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"I should not wish symphonic works to come from my pen which express nothing, and which consist of empty playing with chords, rhythms and modulations... ought not a symphony – that is, the most lyrical of all musical forms – express everything for which there are no words, but which the soul wishes to express, and which requires to be expressed?" - P. Tchaikovsky (from Kraus, 26-7)

These words from the composer himself best explain why Tchaikovsky chose the classical symphonic form as the vehicle for relating his inner struggles. The symphony had, by 1888, fallen out of fashion with most Romantic composers, who instead wrote in forms for which a programme would best be suited, as in a symphonic poem or an opera. Yet Tchaikovsky was a complex individual, one who held the music of Mozart in the highest regard but who felt he could never attain its level of mastery in his own music. Reluctantly, he set about working to a template of four movements, book ended with Sonata-Allegro forms and filled in with the more freely interpretable ABA of a Rondo and Valse (which replaced the more oft used Scherzo). Through this loose framework he also employed the concept of *idée fixe* that Berlioz had mastered in the symphonic poem,

a sort of combining of ideals from two different periods. Sensitive to accusations by critics of the period that a lack of true motivic development pervaded his symphonic work, Tchaikovsky used the *idée fixe* as one attempt to bring about a sense of unity to the Fifth Symphony, his first in eleven years (Evans: 123). But where Berlioz' *idée fixe* was attached to a programme of considerable fantasy, Tchaikovsky had only the inner torments of his own life problems on which to draw his programme. Hitherto he had written plenty of music set to pre-existing, non-autobiographical material (the ballets, suites, *Romeo & Juliet*, *Hamlet*, etc.), but the symphony could for him express without words those issues too personal for public consumption.

Three principal sources of conflict in Tchaikovsky's life set the stage for this work. One is the aforementioned strained relationship of the composer to the coterie of music critics of the time, which stood in stark contrast to his immense popularity with the general concert-going public. Critics were willing to give Tchaikovsky his due as a masterful orchestrator and brilliant melodist, but were quick to expose what they saw in him as a weakness, his struggle with classical forms. They felt his music carried with it a certain stasis, where themes were repeated and interchanged throughout, merely dressed in different orchestral clothing and key centers in each instance, but without much counterpoint or a sense of motivic development. A lot of this view has to do with these critics' bias toward the functional polarity of V-I key relationships in the masterpieces before Tchaikovsky's time, and the traditional developmental techniques that naturally arise from these basic relationships, but as we shall see later, the Fifth Symphony is based on a) a plagal cadential structure, not a dominant one, and b) two primary key centers (e-minor and D Major) that compete for primacy in the narrative inner-drama that unfolds.

Still, the critics' acerbic commentary (which had lasted well into the 20<sup>th</sup> Century) did not go unnoticed, and Tchaikovsky "came eventually to agree with these negative comments about his latest symphony... *'there is something repulsive in it, a kind of excessive diversity of color and insincere artificiality'*" (Poznansky: 495).

The second source of conflict with Tchaikovsky was the individual character of his musical inclinations, as opposed to a national one. Europe in the late 19<sup>th</sup> Century was ripe with nationalism, and the music of the day reflected these sentiments. Russia was no exception: its Mighty Handful featured five composers who sought to express themselves with a very national character. Tchaikovsky for his part was endeared to his native land as much as any, and many of his themes evoke a Russian folk-like character. But rather than employ actual folk melodies for the purpose of creating high art music, he sought instead to create original material that, if it was inherently Russian, arose from his subconscious realm, perhaps dating back to his childhood. In addition, he was freely inclined to borrow from other traditions: "A creature of emotion and impulse, it was impossible for him to refuse any musical experience that made an immediate appeal for him or to reject, on theoretical grounds, any form of beauty which aroused his natural admiration" (Cooper: 37). A stirring example of this is the Valse movement in the work, whose foundation is part of a Florentine street song. The Mighty Handful and others did not take well to his free-spirited musical wanderings, and this may well have had an impact on his tendency to be socially introverted. In fact, his most enduring friendship was a purely platonic epistolary relationship with a rich widow benefactor named Nadezhda von Meck, whose patronage enabled Tchaikovsky to leave his teaching post at Moscow Conservatory and focus on writing. She highly espoused his musical ideals and

encouraged him in his path, but his eternal quest to please her added much pressure to his psyche, and just two years after the Fifth Symphony she would end their friendship, ostensibly due to the revelation of the socially unacceptable secret that Tchaikovsky was homosexual.

The undercurrent of Tchaikovsky's sexual orientation in an environment hostile toward homosexuality provides the third and most specifically relevant source of conflict in his later music. Only more recent scholarship has addressed this issue, with particular attention given to his notes for the programme of the Fifth Symphony's opening movement:

Introduction.

Complete resignation before Fate, or, which is the same, before the inscrutable predestination of Providence.

Allegro.

(I) Murmurs, doubts, complaints, reproaches against XXX

(II) Shall I throw myself into the embraces of Faith???

(Kraus: 26-7)

Timothy Jackson has refuted an earlier theory that XXX represents the death of a friend, and states it is in fact a cryptogram for Tchaikovsky's sexual orientation itself. This is corroborated by Tchaikovsky's own admission that his symphony would express the socially "inexpressible", but many examples in the work point to such a contention, including a trumpet call in the Finale which evokes Leviticus 18:22, the Day of Judgment when "all sins of the flesh will be punished" (Jackson: 5). Inherent in the work is a struggle to find a solution to Tchaikovsky's problems, where death and triumph of the will compete for ascendancy. Proof that death is one such solution can be found in the #IV chord (C Major over A#) that appears in the first and final movements, and also appears in the death scene of Tchaikovsky's rendering of *Hamlet* in the same year. It is viewed as a "deformed enlargement E-A#-E of the diatonic plagal progression E-A-E,

which serves as the fundamental motive of the work as a whole” (Jackson: 14). Life, albeit a life compromised by keeping a taboo secret, is what wins out triumphantly at the end of the Fifth, but this struggle foreshadows the Sixth Symphony, Tchaikovsky’s swan song, in which death becomes the only solution.

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The tonal plan for Symphony No. 5 (Ex. 1) is part of a tonal “plot” theory, where a crucial opposition between the keys of E and D interlock seemingly separate movements into a broader scheme, instead of merely allowing tunes to resurface superficially. When dramatic linkages are made part of the analysis in this way, a Romantic-era masterpiece can be evaluated on its terms alongside the treasures of the Classical era, and such is the case with this work. Here, the concept of “key” is used symbolically to represent a particular dramatic character or idea, hence the “associative” use of tonality (Kraus: 23). Most key relationships of this period appear separated by a third or a fifth, but with E and D being just a second between them, the eventual transformation and triumph of E over D must occur as a gradual, comprehensive progression. This progression is fundamentally plagal, as opposed to dominant, and the journey from the key of D Major (in the second movement where it is first fully explored) back to the E Major of the Finale (its manifestation of triumph, supplanting its previous negative, minor form in the First Movement) is bridged by an A Major center in the third movement. Thus, the D becomes A: IV/IV and the A becomes E: IV/IV, which completes the key cycle. Two secondary key areas – *f*# minor and C Major – further strengthen

these primary linkages, because the *f#*, occurring between D and A in the overall scheme, is a third between each key, while the C, occurring between the A and the final E, is also a third between each key. This “network of relationships defined by principal and secondary tonics” (Kraus: 26) is visually represented in Figure 1.

The Providence Theme as described under the Introduction of Tchaikovsky’s notes serves as the Refrain for a “cyclic symphony”, and as his *idée fixe* it occurs at least once in every movement. Tchaikovsky indicated in letters to von Meck that, even in his sketches, themes are drawn along with their attendant harmony, rhythm and orchestration. With this in mind, the plagal I-IV-I progression for the Providence Theme, and for Theme Ia of the Allegro in Movement I, foreshadows the plagal scheme for the entire work. Consequently, the Development in the Final Movement ends in A before returning to E in the Recapitulation, completing the “plagal axis” (Kraus: 25). The only instance in the work where a non-plagal, more traditional polarity between I and V occurs is in the Valse (Mvt. III), and for good reason: it is the turning point in the plot, and therefore E and A are used in the exact opposite fashion, where E major becomes the V of A Major instead of a-minor being the iv of e-minor.

The tonal plot for the work is outlined in more detail in Example 1. In the First Movement, the conflict is presented in e-minor, where the largest evidence of an ominous struggle exists. Movement II, the slow movement in Rondo form, provides tonal contrast to the opening movement as it explores the opposing key of D, and while a case for peace and hope is posited, it is also interrupted by the danger that looms. Movement III as mentioned represents the turning point in A, signaling a return towards E major, and the waltz form is clearly a medium in which Tchaikovsky feels quite at home. Movement IV

depicts the conflict resolved in all its glory, where instances of death cry out but are mercilessly suffocated by a triumph of the will. R represents each occurrence of the Refrain, and each primary or secondary key center is situated in their respective movements and sections. As this is a Romantic-era piece, there are several other instances where the harmony appears to be out of the key framework indicated, but these are either chromatic or passing in function, or in some other way subservient to the basic formal outline presented here. In a couple of instances the relative minor is used briefly to substitute for a primary key, as in the First Movement, where in the Exposition b-minor is a temporary tonality en route to the introduction of D Major, and in the Recapitulation c#-minor is a temporary tonality en route to E Major. Also in these two examples, Major becomes its parallel minor, as if to signify the instability of the composer's inner turmoil early in the plot. Two tertiary major key centers (B and F#) appear briefly in the Finale, both based on the same theme group, as if to demonstrate the composer's playful revelry with the celebration, and the secondary key of C Major is shown as a replacement for D because the latter has finally been vanquished (it is also a component of the "death chord", which will be addressed forthcoming).

\* \* \*

Themes play as large a role in the drama as do key centers. In the First Movement, the themes stand as emotional opposites (Example 2). Tchaikovsky was skilled at "constructing themes from scales and arpeggios" (Garden: 118), and there is indeed an emotive tone, either positive or negative, depending on the nature of its motion.



For the Refrain, the tone is negative, due in part to its minor key, but also to the sighing rise and fall to and from an upper neighbor tone, as well as the subsequent descending scalar sixth. Its statement in the lower register of the clarinets and support by bassoons sets a particularly grim quality to the piece early on. The first Theme Group begins with a theme that is also negative in character, due to its minor mode and upper neighbor motion, but also due to the tied-over, unstable quality of its rhythm. Theme Group II, by contrast, begins in the opposing D Major key, and its first theme is represented by a resolute falling 5<sup>th</sup> followed by a scalar ascending 6<sup>th</sup>, signifying an emotionally more positive quality. The second themes in each group support their respective primary counterparts, particularly with regard to orchestration: strings carry Ib, as was so in Ia, while winds carry Iib, as was so in Iia. These supporting themes also point ahead to the middle two movements: the first is static and slow-moving, like in Mvt. II, while the second is waltz-like, as in Mvt. III. The use of theme groups as opposed to just two themes shows Tchaikovsky's seemingly endless outpouring of melodic inventiveness. This is the very thing which got Tchaikovsky in trouble with critics, while he was - in the same breath - beloved by the public: "a theme of striking intrinsic beauty is probably unsuited to a movement in sonata form... a melody of great individuality is impatient of the process, it tends to dominate the whole movement in which it is placed" (Cooper: 29).

If the outer movements with their sonata form were a "bed of Procrustes on which he was sometimes forced to torture his happiest inspirations", Tchaikovsky was perhaps truly happiest with the two inner movements of the symphonic scheme, which allowed "great latitude in content and form" (Cooper: 24). Movement II (Example 3) begins tenderly with a wistful theme from a solo horn. While it also makes use of neighbor

motion (this time in both directions), its shape has far more of an antecedent-consequent quality than in the opening movement. Thus it feels positive and initially at peace. The second theme of A, played by the oboe, makes positive use of arpeggiation, and its ascending scalar sixth (ornamented by appoggiaturas) contrasts with the descending sixth of the Refrain. This inner peace however is disturbed in the B section, first by an increasingly agitated new theme in f#-minor, one that descends stepwise by a sixth, and whose clarinet trills and sixteenths contribute an unsettled, doubtful character to the plot. It could be said that the three solo instruments early on are the inner voices of a man in crisis, unsure where to turn and making a plea for assistance. A sweeping, *stringendo* propels the *cantabile* pace toward its first Refrain interruption, a signal that the inner conflict is far from resolved. It is the “culmination of doubt which had been building throughout the B section” (Kraus: 33), and it will return once again, but not before the emotions of the original A themes also return, now with the hysteria implicit in Tchaikovsky’s octave doublings and *accelerandi*, hinting at a nostalgia of some kind. After the final interruption, the hysteria dissipates, and while the plot is still unfinished, a call to reason has been answered and hope for a resolution now exists.

In the Valse Movement III (Example 4), Tchaikovsky focuses on opposites, and just as the key centers A and E are now role-reversed, so is the role of the descending scalar 6<sup>th</sup> in the first theme presented. The strings, which in the First Movement played the theme of “murmurs, doubts, complaints and reproaches”, now play a positive role in the work, a sign that “another stage in the healing process has been completed” (Kraus: 33). The other two sub-themes of A make use of the oboe and bassoon, respectively, and begin as near inverses of one another. The second of these has the bassoon culminate in a

syncopation that then cadences. The spiccato sixteenth theme at B is the first instance where a minor key sheds a positive light on the work, and its hemiola groupings of two beats at a time work contrary to the  $\frac{3}{4}$  time feel. Even the appearance of the Refrain now serves as a structural cadence, rather than as an interruption, and it is in a major triad, preparing for its E Major statement at the beginning of Movement IV.

The Finale of Symphony Five incorporates the Refrain as a much more pervasive structural element. It is introduced now as a jubilant E Major theme, again at the beginning of the Development as a bi-tonal victory shout (it is in c-minor while the accompaniment is in C Major which, recalling the tonal plot, was supposed to supplant D Major as a means to resolve the latter's conflict with e-minor), and twice more in the Coda, in minor and major keys, as if to neutralize the role that modality once played in the drama. In the minor key, it is reduced to a single pitch hunting call, transposed often, and thus is at once texturally developmental in character. Theme I is in e-minor, but with a folk-theme quality it too neutralizes past negative associations with that key. Its melodic structure of using a 1-7-1 lower neighbor, followed by a descending fifth, can be traced to a moment of jubilation in the Recapitulation of Movement I (mm. 451-466). Theme Group II also references something earlier in the work: Theme IIa (m. 128) is similar in shape to the principal theme of Movement II (horn solo – mm. 10-12) because of its 1-4-3 upper neighbor motive... eventually though it evolves into Theme IIb (m. 148), which rids itself of that motive and effectively closes that chapter on the healing process in the narrative.

The purpose of the remainder of the last movement is to reaffirm that the struggle is now over. While some critics have compared this to the “nightmare sensation of

running faster and faster while remaining rooted to the spot” (Garden: 120), they perhaps overlook the fact that, while tragic Destiny is defeated in this particular drama, it is not killed completely - beneath every statement of personal victory lies the tremor of doubt. Meanwhile, every subsequent passage in the movement is reminiscent of an epic Russian novel, where previous structural elements are so cleverly tied together at the conclusion. While the Development section (mm. 172-295) is relatively short in proportion to the movement, all sections after the Exposition carry a developmental quality, exploring new temporary key relationships, chromaticism, and weaving together or dovetailing thematic material. A new counter line is added atop Theme I at the Recapitulation (m. 296), rather folk-like and running contrary in motion to the latter. Most impressive is a very extensive Coda section (beginning m. 428), featuring the aforementioned dual-modality statements of the Refrain, a simultaneous play on themes Ia and Ib (m. 504), and even a major key reappearance/transformation of the first theme from Movement I (m. 546)!

\* \* \*

Further exception here should be taken to mention examples of Tchaikovsky’s original devices for developing his materials, in response to some early critics’ accusations of “clinging fast to the simplest material” (Newmarch: 362). For one, his use of melodic transposition up a fifth even within a general key center (see Theme Ia m. 80) creates a bi-tonal harmony worthy of note. Also, his use of the third in the bass throughout many of the minor sections in the work creates a chilling tonal ambiguity, especially when the bass line is in constant, sometimes chromatic motion. Call and

response is used to great success – not only in the expository sections but also as a developmental device (m. 301: Mvt. I). Amazing use of tempo shifting, coupled with genre shifting that includes the waltz, march, hunt calls, gallops and the like, is used throughout the Finale and should not be overlooked. Horn calls occur throughout the Fifth and are a “sinister reminder of the ‘Damocles’ sword, hanging over the head in constant, unremitting, spiritual torment” (Cooper: 40). Tchaikovsky’s weaving of Themes Ia and IIa together (Mvt. I: m. 194) in addition to using a syncopated *stringendo* texture to create a counterpoint, is a terrific developmental device, as are 2-against-3 polyrhythms and extreme dynamic contrasts (Mvt II: m. 96; *Stringendo*). Different textural accompaniments during thematic restatements also occur, as in the triplets of the strings under the Refrain at the Finale’s beginning (m. 24), followed by a tremolo diminution of that texture (m. 39). There is also excellent use of contrary motion in several string harmonic passages (Finale: m. 182). The themes themselves are often elongated and explored to full effect, using scale extension and appoggiaturas, as in Themes Ia and IIa of the Finale (mm. 98, 234, 252). There is even a change of chord function in several places, including m. 323 of the Finale, where e-minor for the first time becomes D:v/V7, and m. 518, where the “death chord” of C/Bb now becomes a F: V7, which is a way of mocking death by making it subservient to a new tonic. The most satisfying developmental device in the work happens while C Major has replaced D Major, paving E Major’s way to triumph in the struggle: at that moment, a dovetailed, ascending brass major triad competes for ascendancy over the descending line of Theme I, culminating in the appearance of the #IV “death chord” (C major/Bb: m. 218), the final moment of impact between joy and despair.

\* \* \*

The Romantic masters through use of color and harmonic expansion could bring a new significance to the melodic phrase, but could not solve the old problem of form. Therefore, “in despair, the old forms were taken over, although more often than not the new wine burst the old skins” (Cooper: 26). Yet this process was necessary in order to create new forms in music, much like the development of Baroque architecture as an extension of Gothic forms. Fear of inferiority, social milieus and of being outed caused Tchaikovsky to channel his inner dramas through the guise of a symphony. His “significant departures from the norm in terms of form, harmony and background structure are programmatically connected with the composer’s musical representation of tragic Destiny” (Jackson: 6), and this in of itself exemplifies innovation at its finest, precisely because it happens where other areas fall short. Whether in this example or in Berlioz’ symphonic poem, it was a necessary season of innovation.

Example 1. Tonal Plan for Complete Symphony

**I conflict presented**  
Intro. Exposition Devel. Recap. Coda

**II tonal contrast**  
A B A' R

**III pivotal point**  
A B A' R

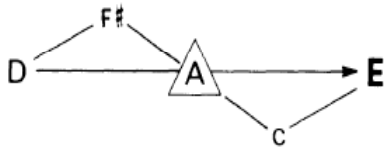
**IV conflict resolved**  
Intro. Exposition Devel. Recap. Coda (Mvt. I recalled)

e: I - IV - I      b / D → d    e    e# / E → e    D    f#    D

A: I - V - I    f#    A    E: I - IV - I    e    C6 → C6    C → B → a    e    F#6 → E6    e → E

(greatest opposition to e: I - IV - I)

Figure 1.



Example 2. Movement I: Themes

**R Andante**  
e: I IV I

**Th. I Allegro con anima**  
(Cl.; Bsn. diva basso) pp I IV I IV I

**Th. II**  
(Cl.) f (Strs.) mf ff

Example 3. Movement II: Themes

Andante cantabile

A<sup>1</sup> (Hn.) I V<sub>3</sub> I<sup>6</sup>

Con moto

A<sup>2</sup> (Ob.) p f

Moderato con anima

B (Cl.) mf V

Example 4. Movement III: Themes

Valse

Allegro moderato

A<sup>1</sup> (Vlns.) A:

A<sup>2</sup> (Ob., Bsn.) (2-N-N-2?)

A<sup>3</sup> (Bsn.) 2-N-2

B (Strs.) p spiccato assai I (IV<sub>2</sub>) (VII<sup>6</sup>?) tonic ped. I

Example 5.

Mvt. IV: Th. I

Allegro vivace

(Strs.) f

Mvt. I: Th. II

(+8va)

(Strs., W.W.) ff

(Vlns., Fls.) I

(in D in Exposition, m. 194)

Movement IV. mm. 296-304

296 counterline

RECAP.

Th. I



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