

# Tschaikowsky-Gesellschaft

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(Brett Langston)

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Philip Ross Bullock, *Tchaikovsky*. London: Reaktion Books, 2016. 219 pages. ISBN 978-1-78023-654-4. (Critical Lives series).

Tchaikovsky is only the fifth composer (after Cage, Debussy, Stravinsky and Wagner) to be featured in the *Critical Lives* series of short biographies, which includes individuals as diverse as Coco Chanel, Karl Marx, and Virginia Woolf amongst its seventy titles.

For this new addition to the series, Philip Ross Bullock, professor of Russian Literature at the University of Oxford, and author of *The Correspondence of Jean Sibelius and Rosa Newmarch, 1906–1939* (2011), has been set the task of exploring Tchaikovsky's life and works in little more than 200 pages: a formidable challenge compared with the 1600 pages and four volumes available to David Brown,<sup>1</sup> or even the 670 pages afforded to Alexander Poznansky.<sup>2</sup>

Bullock begins by pondering the hazards facing Tchaikovsky's prospective biographers when relying on the composer's own correspondence as a primary source, noting that Tchaikovsky himself admitted in his diary that he was "[...] always concerned about the impression that my letter will produce not only on my correspondent, but even on some casual reader. As a result, I pose. Sometimes I try to make the tone of the letter simple and sincere, that is, to make it *seem* so. But apart from letters written in a moment of *emotion*, I am never myself in a letter." (p. 13, citing an entry in Tchaikovsky's diary from June 1888). Bullock's introduction also conjectures how Tchaikovsky might have been perceived today had he died much younger, or even older, than his 53 years.

The first chapter opens with the première of Tchaikovsky's First Symphony in 1868, and in a pattern generally followed in the rest of the book, the composer's works function as navigational beacons to the salient events of his personal life. In such a compact study it would be neither possible nor appropriate to attempt detailed musical analysis, but instead Bullock draws from critical reviews of the composer's contemporaries, such as Herman Laroche, and is able to make his own insightful comparisons of the reputations of Tchaikovsky's operas during his lifetime.

From the outset Bullock maintains that "Tchaikovsky was decidedly not a victim of circumstance or conspiracy, much less a pathological case study in melancholia or sexual guilt" (pp. 9–10), and the contentious issues of the composer's marriage, homosexuality, and death are deftly handled in the central and concluding chapters.

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<sup>1</sup> David Brown, *Tchaikovsky. A biographical and critical study*, 4 vols., London: Gollancz, 1978–1991.

<sup>2</sup> Alexander Poznansky, *Tchaikovsky. The quest for the inner man*, New York: Schirmer Books, 1991.

It is a minor disappointment that, presumably due to size constraints, the book lacks any indexes to names or works mentioned in the text, which would have been advantageous for the reader. There are also a few striking typographical issues, where square blocks have replaced accented characters in some Slavic names.<sup>3</sup> Yet these are merely minor quibbles, and Bullock's *Tchaikovsky* is a welcome modern, concise and considered study of the composer's life and works.

Brett Langston

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<sup>3</sup> For example the references to Jan H ímalý (p. 128), Antonín Dvo ák (p. 149) and Władysław Pachulski (p. 166).