

# “That’s Not the Only Reason We Love Him”: Tchaikovskii Reception in Post-Soviet Russia

Philip Ross Bullock

In a widely reported television interview with journalists from Russia’s *Pervyi kanal* (Chanel One) and the Associated Press agency on September 3, 2013, Vladimir Putin found himself commenting on the sexuality of Russia’s most famous nineteenth-century composer: “Everybody says that Petr Il’ich Tchaikovskii was a homosexual. Well that’s not the reason we love him, but because he was a great musician, and we all love his music.”<sup>1</sup> Exactly why the Russian president felt obliged to discuss this question becomes clear when one considers that his remarks were made in the context of legislation passed earlier that summer by the Russian parliament and designed to prevent the “propaganda of non-traditional sexual relations” among minors. With profound consequences for charities, NGOs, teachers, clinicians, and many others involved in education, medicine, and social work, the law has had implications in the cultural field too, especially where Russia’s national heroes are concerned.

In the summer of 2012, for instance, it was reported that the film and theatre director, Kirill Serebrennikov, was at work on a cinematic biography of the composer, with a script by Iurii Arabov. Already around this time there were anxieties that issues surrounding the treatment of Tchaikovskii’s sexuality might imperil the project. As the journal *KinoPoisk* noted in a short interview with Serebrennikov, “the film may become a victim of legislative prohibitions: officials see it as propaganda for homosexuality and are afraid of the story of the composer’s fate, which can hardly be called a happy one.”<sup>2</sup> Nonetheless, in July 2013, the film’s producer, Sabina Ereemeeva, was able to report that the biopic was still scheduled for release in 2015 as part of the celebrations surrounding Tchaikovskii’s 175th anniversary.<sup>3</sup> A month later, however, Arabov gave a long interview to the newspaper, *Izvestiia*, in which he reported on impediments to the development of the script, and in particular on its treatment of the composer’s sexuality: “There is nothing to suggest that Tchaikovskii was a homosexual. Only philistines think that. There’s no need for cinema to show what philistines believe.”<sup>4</sup> Despite Arabov’s claim that his objects were primarily esthetic (“this topic is outside the sphere of art”), it is clear that his decision was motivated by the recently enacted legislation on

1. “Putin: govoriat, Tchaikovskii byl gomoseksualistom, no my liubim ego ne za eto,” *Ria Novosti*, September 4, 2013, at <http://ria.ru/politics/20130904/960605375.html> (last accessed December 19, 2017).

2. “Serebrennikov i Arabov napisali stsenarii o Tchaikovskom,” *KinoPoisk*, August 21, 2012, at <http://www.kinopoisk.ru/news/1951791/> (last accessed December 19, 2017).

3. “Fil’m ‘Tchaikovskii’ Serebrennikova vyidet v 2015 godu,” *Ria Novosti*, July 26, 2013, at <http://ria.ru/culture/20130726/952250407.html> (last accessed December 19, 2017).

4. “Ia ne podpishus’ pod fil’mom, kotoryi reklamiruet gomoseksualizm,” *Izvestiia*, August 20, 2013, at <http://izvestia.ru/news/555599> (last accessed December 19, 2017).

so-called gay propaganda (“I will not put my name to a film which promotes homosexuality”).<sup>5</sup>

Then, in an interview on September 17, 2013 with the Russian news agency Interfax, the Minister of Culture, Vladimir Medinskii, came out in support of Arabov’s line: “Arabov is, incidentally, correct—there is no proof that Tchaikovskii was a homosexual. Tchaikovskii was one of the greatest Russian composers—that’s a fact. Tchaikovskii is a genius, and the creative team believes that it is about Tchaikovskii’s genius that one should make a film, and not about rumors surrounding his biography.”<sup>6</sup> The next day, Serebrennikov gave his response to the summer’s events in a Facebook posting that was widely reported in the press and recirculated on the Internet:

The Russian Cinema Fund has not given any money for *Tchaikovskii* (with a script by Arabov and Serebrennikov). They have said that “they don’t see any audience potential.” Before this several interviews with various Russian cultural figures appeared in the press with incendiary speculations as to “whether Petr Il’ich was gay or not.” “Not gay,” asserts the Minister of Culture and my co-author. “Gay!” replies the whole world in chorus. Everybody is very interested by this. Everybody is very agitated by this. Everybody speculates as to why we love him—“for this reason, or not for this reason.” Vulgarity, vulgarity, philistine vulgarity . . .<sup>7</sup>

Claiming that the Ministry of Culture had already promised thirty million rubles towards the film’s total projected budget of 240 million rubles that June, Serebrennikov announced his intention of returning this subsidy and seeking funding from sources outside of Russia instead.<sup>8</sup> Official reaction to the director’s statement was as contradictory as it was swift. In a series of statements made on September 19, 2013, Medinskii claimed that he had received no official indication of Serebrennikov’s intention of returning the money, suggesting that the director’s announcement was primarily designed to stir up “additional publicity for this film, additional PR.”<sup>9</sup> Medinskii then claimed that he was unaware as to whether the expert commission of the Russian Film Fund had recommended funding or not.<sup>10</sup> Finally, later that day, the commission itself announced that the film had failed to gain sufficient votes to be eligible for support.<sup>11</sup>

5. Ibid.

6. “Net nikakikh dokazatel’stv gomoseksual’nosti Tchaikovskogo,” September 17, 2013, at <http://www.interfax.ru/interview/329409> (last accessed December 19, 2017).

7. Kirill Serebrennikov, Facebook post, September 18, 2013, <https://ru-ru.facebook.com/kirill.serebrennikov/posts/10152177970704338> (last accessed December 19, 2017).

8. Ibid.

9. “Minkul’ tury ne poluchalo ot Serebrennikova otkaz ot gospodderzhki fil’ma,” *Ria Novosti*, September 19, 2013, at <http://ria.ru/culture/20130919/964261664.html> (last accessed December 19, 2017).

10. “Medinskii: Fond kino ne prinial reshenie o podderzhke fil’ma ‘Tchaikovskii,’” *Ria Novosti*, September 19, 2013, at <http://ria.ru/culture/20130919/964268587.html> (last accessed December 19, 2017).

11. “Fil’m ‘Tchaikovskii’ ne byl odobren ekspertnym sovetom ‘Fonda kino,’” *Ria Novosti*, September 19, 2013, at <http://ria.ru/culture/20130919/964339146.html> (last accessed December 19, 2017).

This lively saga, which was widely reported in both the Russian and western media, illustrates the rapidity with which news circulates in the Internet age, as well as the way in which new media facilitate the dissemination of competing narrative accounts of a single event or phenomenon.<sup>12</sup> It also attests to the fact that despite the prominence of sex (predominantly heterosexual) in post-Soviet society and popular culture, consideration of the intimate details of the private lives of Russia's national heroes and heroines is still constrained by the presence of durable social taboos and a tendency to self-censorship on the part of creative artists.<sup>13</sup> Moreover, where homosexuality is discussed, it is often within the context of what Stephen Amico has termed "the castrating straightjacket of the 'spiritual homosexual.'"<sup>14</sup> With roots in Silver Age thought (especially that of the philosopher, Vasilii Rozanov), the notion of the "spiritual homosexual" stresses abstinence and sublimation, as well as suffering and even martyrdom, as essential features of gay male identity in Russia.<sup>15</sup> The outline details of Tchaikovskii's life—at least as they were presented in most published biographies until comparatively recently—seem to support just such an interpretation. As Amico suggests: "The failed marriage to Antonina Miliukova, the 'virtual' relationship to Nadezhda von Meck and, ultimately, the mythologized apocryphal 'suicide' necessitated by a physical relationship with another man, on the one hand, and the postulated 'artistic sensitivity' on the other keep alive to the present day the construction of the spiritual homosexual, one whose transgressions regarding male-to-male physical sexuality may only result in death."<sup>16</sup> More broadly, the pattern of Tchaikovskii reception in contemporary Russia, at least when it comes to the question of his sexuality, seems to substantiate a widespread interpretation of Putin's third presidency from 2012 as an era of conservatism, reaction, and increased state control, after the comparative liberalism of the immediate post-Soviet period.

In its general outlines, such a description is undoubtedly true, yet it fails to account for the complex nature of contemporary cultural politics within the post-Soviet space, as well as for the often fluid interaction of official, academic, artistic, and popular narratives when it comes to the treatment of Tchaikovskii's biography. More critically, it risks reinforcing a simplistic binary opposition between Russia and the west when it comes to the acceptance of and attitudes towards homosexuality. Western media discussion, whether of recent Russian responses to Tchaikovskii's private life or of contemporary Russian views on homosexuality, tends to juxtapose a liberal and progressive

12. See also Richard Taruskin's account in "Introduction: My Wonderful World; or, Dismembering the Triad," in *Russian Music at Home and Abroad: New Essays* (Oakland, 2016), 1–29 (especially 4–9).

13. See, for instance, Eliot Borenstein, *Overkill: Sex and Violence in Contemporary Russian Popular Culture* (Ithaca, 2008), and Valerie Sperling, *Sex, Politics and Putin: Political Legitimacy in Russia* (New York, 2015).

14. Stephen Amico, *Roll Over, Tchaikovsky! Russian Popular Music and Post-Soviet Homosexuality* (Urbana, 2014), 186.

15. See Brian James Baer, *Other Russias: Homosexuality and the Crisis of Post-Soviet Identity* (New York, 2009), especially Chapter 4, "Resurrecting the Spiritual Homosexual: Homosexuality and Russia Cultural Citizenship," 91–119.

16. Amico, *Roll Over, Tchaikovsky!*, 186.

understanding of homosexuality against a more conservative, even judgmental attitude supposedly characteristic of less “advanced” parts of the world. As Francesca Stella notes, however, such a view is underpinned by broader, geopolitical considerations, in which issues of sexual identity are instrumentalized in the service of ideology: “Orientalist discourses constructing the region as ‘traditional,’ ‘premodern’ or ‘underdeveloped’ have positioned it as the west’s ‘Other,’ both during the Cold War and since the demise of communist rule and the onset of the process of European integration.”<sup>17</sup> Certainly, the west’s increasing advocacy of LGBTQQIAAP rights is an important element within a broader commitment to human rights.<sup>18</sup> Yet this commitment can often shade into regional rivalry, in which attitudes to homosexuality are metonymic of broader political and ideological schisms.<sup>19</sup> It is also worth noting that there is no single, unified west when it comes to LGBTQQIAAP rights. Social acceptance, and more recently legal recognition, of a range of non-heterosexual identities is still far from universal in the western world, where practical moves to establish the equal status of gay lives are often vigorously

17. Francesca Stella, *Lesbian Lives in Soviet and Post-Soviet Russia: Post/Socialism and Gendered Sexualities* (Basingstoke, 2015), 1. Compare too Brian James Baer’s observation that “the traditional opposition of east and west may continue to structure the western gaze, producing by-now-familiar patterns of blindness and insight, whether we employ the original developmental model (an enlightened west as the goal for a backward east) or invert it (a premodern east as an erotic alternative to a modern west).” See Baer, *Other Russias*, 34.

18. The acronym LGBTQQIAAP—lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, questioning, intersex, asexual, allies, and pansexual—is preferred by some activists on the grounds that it suggests a maximally inclusive spectrum of non-heteronormative identities.

19. In her influential *Terrorist Assemblages: Homonationalism in Queer Times* (Durham, 2007), Jasbir K. Puar has argued that a number of recent developments in the capitalist west—including “the changing demographics of HIV transmission, prevention funding, and pharmaceutical industry exploitation; the decriminalization of sodomy in the United States; the global (albeit uneven) incorporation of various versions of legalized gay marriage and domestic partnership; the rise of a global gay right wing anchored in Europe and attaining credibility very pointedly through Islamophobia; flourishing gay and lesbian representation . . . ; normativizing gay and lesbian human rights frames, which produce (in tandem with gay tourism) gay-friendly and not-gay-friendly nations” (xiii-xiv)—have produced a modern gay identity that draws on the discourse of human rights to produce categories of citizenship that are embedded in the interests of the nation. Although Puar’s emphasis is on the consequences of this particular construction of a modern queer identity for “the articulation of Muslim, Arab, Sikh, and South Asian sexualities” (xiii), as well as on the link between homosexuality and western narratives of terrorism and counterterrorism, many of her arguments can apply, albeit with a number of substantial modifications and equivocations, to relations between Russia and the west. In particular, the interaction between western “homonationalism” and local Russian politics becomes a topical issue when Russia has sought to capitalize on its involvement with international events, such as Eurovision Song Contest and the Olympic Games (in this case, the 2014 Winter Olympics held in Sochi). For a study of how Dima Bilan’s 2008 Eurovision victory was predicated on an astute accommodation with the contest’s queer appeal, see Julie A. Cassiday, “Post-Soviet Pop Goes Gay: Russia’s Trajectory to Eurovision Victory,” *Russian Review* 73, no. 1 (2014): 1–23. See also Catherine Baker, “The ‘Gay Olympics’? The Eurovision Song Contest and the Politics of LGBT/European Belonging,” *European Journal of International Relations* 23, no. 1 (2017): 97–121.

contested at a local level.<sup>20</sup> None of this is to gainsay the recent legislative restrictions that have been placed on the public discussion of homosexuality in Russia, nor is it to downplay the often virulently homophobic tone of much contemporary Russian nationalism. Rather, it is to sound a cautionary note when it comes to understanding the ways in which the private lives of LGBTQIAAP citizens intersect with the interests of the particular states in which they reside.

A similar caveat can be entered when it comes to Tchaikovskii's personal life, as the handling of this question in the west has hardly been unproblematic or unprejudiced. As Malcolm Hamrick Brown and Richard Taruskin have both documented, negative and judgmental attitudes towards homosexuality pervade a large number of twentieth-century English-language biographies.<sup>21</sup> By misrepresenting both the details of Tchaikovskii's private life and his attitude to it, as well as promoting a series of pseudo-autobiographical readings of a number of his works, such accounts have also created a critical environment where the composer's death from cholera in 1893 has been interpreted by some as suicide, despite the lack of any documentary or circumstantial evidence to support such a hypothesis.<sup>22</sup> It was not until 1991, and the publication of Alexander Poznansky's detailed biographical study of Tchaikovskii's life and personality, that a more sympathetic and non-judgmental portrait began to emerge.<sup>23</sup> Even here, however, Poznansky's emphasis on the composer's private life has provoked a degree of hostile criticism, despite his command of a vast range of pertinent and original documentary sources. Adherents of the suicide theory have continued to press their claims, which ultimately rest on a view of homosexuality that is exclusively tragic and self-hating, necessarily leading to an untimely death. If much contemporary Russian discussion of Tchaikovskii's sexuality is either prudish or reactionary, then such claims must equally be laid at the door of much western biographical writing, too.

20. For analyses of how, in parts of East-Central Europe, homophobia has been deployed as a marker of nationalism, see Kevin Moss, "Split Europe: Homonationalism and Homophobia in Croatia," in Phillip M. Ayoub and David Paternotte, eds., *LGBT Activism and the Making of Europe: A Rainbow Europe?* (Basingstoke, 2014), 212–32, and Kevin Moss, "Split Pride/Split Identities," *QED: A Journal in GLBTQ Worldmaking* 3, no. 2 (Summer 2016): 56–75.

21. Malcolm Hamrick Brown, "Tchaikovsky and His Music in Anglo-American Criticism, 1890s-1950s," in Alexandar Mihailovic, ed., *Tchaikovsky and his Contemporaries: A Centennial Symposium* (Westport, 1999), 61–74, reprinted in Sophie Fuller and Lloyd Whitesell, eds., *Queer Episodes in Music and Modern Identity* (Urbana, 2002), 134–49; Richard Taruskin, "Pathetic Symphonist: Chaikovsky, Russia, Sexuality, and the Study of Music," in *On Russian Music* (Berkeley, 2009), 76–104.

22. For a survey of how this story came to be spread, and a detailed rebuttal of its claims, see Alexander Poznansky, *Tchaikovsky's Last Days: A Documentary Study* (Oxford, 1996). Timothy L. Jackson's impressionistic interpretation of the supposed program of the *Pathétique* as "a rich tapestry of interrelated narratives all of which contribute to the idea of homosexuality as an incurable 'disease' culminating in the destruction of the protagonists" can be found in *Tchaikovsky: Symphony No. 6 (Pathétique)* (Cambridge, 1999), 39.

23. Alexander Poznansky, *Tchaikovsky: The Quest for the Inner Man* (New York, 1991).

## Soviet Nostalgia and Post-Soviet Erasure

It is impossible to understand contemporary Russian attitudes toward Tchaikovskii's sexuality without taking into account how the ambiguous legacy of the Soviet past shapes the ways in which people think and talk about the private lives of the country's national heroes. Take, for instance, Putin's statement of September 3, 2013: "Everybody says that Petr Il'ch Tchaikovskii was a homosexual. Well that's not the reason we love him, but because he was a great musician, and we all love his music." This seemingly straightforward statement, characteristic of Putin's easy-going conversational manner when dealing with the press, is in fact an echo of a Soviet-era anecdote (whether conscious or subconscious is hard to tell):

Армянское радио спрашивают: "Правда ли, что Чайковский был гомосексуалистом?" Армянское радио отвечает: "Правда, но мы любим его не только за это."<sup>24</sup>

In Putin's commentary, the original answer ("that's not the only reason we love him") is inverted to become its very opposite ("that's not the reason we love him"). Whether or not Putin was consciously alluding to the Soviet anecdote, his version never quite effaces the knowing humor of the original, which still enjoys wide currency in Russia. Accordingly, two parallel discourses are held in uneasy tension within a single phrase. On the one hand, there is the high-minded "official" version which stresses creativity to the exclusion of all else (we all love Tchaikovskii's music and that's all there is to it); on the other hand, there is a popular version, which takes immodest delight in details of the composer's personal life precisely because they are not part of the authorized account (we all know that Tchaikovskii was gay, and that's precisely why we love him).

The other thing to observe about Putin's statement is that it does not deny Tchaikovskii's sexuality. Unlike Arabov and Medinskii, Putin appears to accept the historically documented fact of the composer's homosexuality, while simultaneously denying its relevance. It is here that the influence of Soviet attitudes toward Tchaikovskii's biography can be felt most clearly. As Poznansky has argued, the immediate post-Revolutionary era had little time for the composer, who "was systematically condemned by the official press as a phenomenon altogether alien to the proletarian consciousness. . . . The prevailing view saw Tchaikovsky's music as decadent and melancholic, fraught

24. People call in to ask Armenian radio: "Is it true that Tchaikovskii was a homosexual?" Armenian radio replies: "Yes, it's true, but that's not the only reason we love him." On the genre of Armenian Radio jokes (including this one), see E. Shmeleva, "Anekdoty ob armianskom radio: struktura i iazykovye osobennosti," at <http://www.ruthenia.ru/folklore/shmeleva1.htm> (last accessed December 19, 2017). A variant of this joke is also included in Nikolai Olin, *Govorit "Radio Erevan": Izbrannye voprosy i otvety*, 3rd ed. (Munich, 1970), 67. Here, the more colloquial "pederast" is preferred to "gomoseksualist," and an additional phrase ("Some people like his music too") is included at the end. On the generic conventions of Putin's interactions with the media, see Anna Maslennikova, "Putin and the Tradition of the Interview in Russian Discourse," in Birgit Beumers, Stephen Hutchings and Natalia Rulyova, eds., *The Post-Soviet Russian Media: Conflicting Signals* (London, 2009), 89–104.

with pessimism and *ennui*, and therefore incompatible with the goals of world revolution.”<sup>25</sup> Yet this view, advanced most virulently by proletarian groups in the 1920s, was not universally held, and Tchaikovskii scholarship benefited from a good deal of state-sponsored institutional support from the immediate post-Revolutionary period onwards. His former house at Klin was nationalized in 1921, with Lenin describing it as “a national and cultural monument whose preservation intact is of importance for the entire country.”<sup>26</sup> Then, in 1923, Tchaikovskii’s diaries were published by his brother, Ippolit. Although hardly expansive or (self-)analytical, these nonetheless provided the basis for a tentative reconstruction of elements of his personal life, including a number of seemingly erotic encounters with other men, both in Russia and abroad.<sup>27</sup>

The careful documentation of some of the most intimate details of Tchaikovskii’s personal life continued well into the Stalin period, even after the criminalization of homosexual acts between men in 1934. His complete correspondence with his patron, Nadezhda fon Mekh, was published in three substantial volumes between 1934 and 1936, and although the letters themselves made no direct mention of the composer’s sexuality, the editors were candid enough when it came to this question, as their commentary on the circumstances surrounding his marriage makes clear:

Now, forty years after Tchaikovskii’s death, it is necessary to illuminate this episode of his life with complete frankness. Tchaikovskii belongs to history; his life is the object of serious study, and we are obliged to disclose all the facts to scholarship, without undue concern as to the prurient curiosity of the casual reader.

By his nature, Tchaikovskii had no feelings for women. . . . Tchaikovskii was homosexual, and this—both objectively and subjectively speaking—was the source of his greatest tragedy. . . . Tchaikovskii was evidently homosexual by nature, because his attempt to change the character of his sexual life had no effect.<sup>28</sup>

To back up their claims, the editors of the correspondence cited extracts from a number of letters that Tchaikovskii wrote to his brothers in 1876 and in which he explained the reasons behind his decision to marry. These letters were included, at greater length, in the first volume of a projected anthology of Tchaikovskii’s correspondence with his family that appeared in 1940, and this work further amplified the scholarly picture when it came both to his sexuality and his attitude towards it.<sup>29</sup> To be sure, the print runs of these publications were limited, and access to them was tightly regulated (this was particularly the case when it came to the diaries and the letters to his family,

25. Alexander Poznansky, “Tchaikovsky as Communist Icon,” in Michael S. Flier and Robert P. Hughes, eds., *For SK: In Celebration of the Life and Career of Simon Karlinsky* (Oakland, 1994), 233.

26. Cited in *ibid.*, 234.

27. Ippolit I. Tchaikovskii, ed., *Dnevnik P. I. Tchaikovskogo, 1873–1891* (Moscow, 1923).

28. “Primechaniia,” in P. I. Tchaikovskii, *Perepiska s N. F. fon Mekh*, ed. V. A. Zhdanov and N. T. Zhegin, 3 vols. (Moscow, 1934–6), 1: 567–608 (570), partially cited in Taruskin, “Pathetic Symphonist,” 83.

29. P. I. Tchaikovskii, *Pis'ma k rodnym* (Moscow, 1940).

both of which soon became, in that well-known Soviet euphemism, “bibliographical rarities”). Nonetheless, their publication attests to a documentary impulse in early Soviet scholarship that ran contrary to the sanitized account of the composer’s life that had been promoted by his brother, Modest, whose substantial three-volume biography of 1900–02 formed the basis for much subsequent criticism and biographical writing.<sup>30</sup>

This documentary impulse sat rather uneasily, however, with officially sanctioned campaigns to promote Tchaikovskii’s music as suitable for mass audiences (part of the largescale rehabilitation of the nineteenth-century canon that took place beginning from the early 1930s in all cultural fields).<sup>31</sup> Here, a more puritanical approach prevailed, especially from 1940, when extensive celebrations were held across the Soviet Union to mark the one-hundredth anniversary of the composer’s birth. A critical edition of his works was launched, including a multi-volume collection of his almost-complete letters.<sup>32</sup> Here, as Poznansky observes, references to Tchaikovskii’s sexuality were now removed (as were expressions of monarchist or autocratic sympathies, vulgarities, profanities, and a number of anti-Semitic remarks): “The one unifying principle behind the censor’s efforts was the desire to avoid at all costs any embarrassing detail regarding the composer’s private life. . . . Indeed, it can be argued that hardly any other figure in the entire history of Russian culture (with the possible exception of Lenin) had been the object of such a complex strategy of accumulated silences and falsifications.”<sup>33</sup> This was an accessible, *narodnyi* Tchaikovskii, repackaged for Soviet audiences in a process that culminated in Igor’ Talankin’s 1969 biopic, starring Innokentii Smoktunovskii as the composer.<sup>34</sup>

Yet such top-down processes of mythologization could not entirely control popular responses to Tchaikovskii’s biography, just as censorship could not entirely erase the documentary revelations of the 1920s and 1930s. As Poznansky suggests: “The other side of the coin had been the mythmaking, though in unwritten form, that existed side by side with official scholarship and that affected popular imagination. Where censorship and restraints on free research created a virtual information vacuum, word of mouth became the chief source of information.”<sup>35</sup> As with other gay individuals, such as Oscar Wilde, whose reputation was also sanitized for public consumption during the Soviet period, illicit knowledge, however marginal and unsanctioned, could create alternative patterns of reception that went against the

30. Modest Tchaikovskii, *Zhizn’ Petra Il’icha Tchaikovskogo: po dokumentam, khra-niashchimsia v arkhive imeni pokoinogo kompozitora v Klinu*, 3 vols. (Moscow, 1900–02).

31. Marina Raku, *Muzykal’naia klassika v mifotvorchestve sovetskoi epokhi* (Moscow, 2014), especially chapter 5, “Perekovka Tchaikovskogo,” 564–659, and Pauline Fairclough, *Classics for the Masses: Shaping Soviet Musical Identity under Lenin and Stalin* (New Haven, 2016).

32. P. I. Tchaikovskii, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii: Literaturnye proizvedeniia i perepiska*, 18 vols. (Moscow, 1959–83).

33. Poznansky, “Tchaikovsky as Communist Icon,” 241.

34. Marsha Seifert, “Russian Lives, Soviet Films: Tchaikovsky, the Biopic and the Cold War,” in Lars Karl, ed., *Leinwand zwischen Tauwetter und Frost: Der osteuropäische Spiel- und Dokumentarfilm im Kalten Krieg* (Berlin, 2007), 133–70.

35. Poznansky, “Tchaikovsky as Communist Icon,” 241.

official grain.<sup>36</sup> It is, then, through the tension between official and unofficial accounts of Tchaikovskii's biography that the significance of Putin's reference to a Soviet-era anecdote can be grasped. By claiming that it was above all Tchaikovskii's creative genius that was of greatest importance to modern audiences ("he was a great musician, and we all love his music"), Putin was subscribing to an official Soviet view that held discussion of the composer's sexuality to be unnecessary to an understanding of his life and art. Yet by potentially alluding to a popular joke, he was simultaneously revealing his debt to a censored tradition that circulated by word of mouth.

Generationally and ideologically, Putin represents a number of ways in which the legacy of the Soviet era has resurfaced when it comes to present-day attitudes to Tchaikovskii's biography. At the same time, his intervention in the debates of summer 2013 overlooks and even effaces an important series of post-Soviet developments in scholarship and criticism. In fact, restrictions on discussing Tchaikovskii's sexuality had been partially lifted in the late-Soviet period, although as Poznansky notes, "what was made public, after decades of suppression, was not the scholarly-verified material about Tchaikovsky's personal life, but by and large the same sort of folk mythology about him."<sup>37</sup> It was, however, 1993 that marked a turning point, since this was the year in which homosexual acts between men were decriminalized in the Russian Federation, and freedom from censorship was guaranteed under the new constitution. Coincidentally or not, this was also the year which witnessed a rush of new publications giving a very different account of Tchaikovskii's private life from the one that had prevailed beforehand. His diaries were republished for the first time in seventy years (an event described by one reviewer as "sensational"), and Nina Berberova's *Tchaikovskii: Istoriia odinokoi zhizni* (*Tchaikovskii: The Story of a Lonely Life*), originally published in Berlin in 1936, also appeared in Russia for the very first time.<sup>38</sup> Based partly on documentary sources published in the Soviet Union in the 1920s and early 1930s, and partly on stories that Berberova had herself picked up in the Russian émigré community in Berlin and Paris, it provided a far more worldly and intimate account of the composer's life than had been previously available to Russian readers.<sup>39</sup>

Scholarship in the early post-Soviet period also contributed to this process of revision. Poznansky's *Samoubiitvo Tchaikovskogo: Mif i real'nost'*

36. Philip Ross Bullock, "Not One of Us? The Paradoxes of Translating Oscar Wilde in the Soviet Union," in Leon Burnett and Emily Lygo, eds., *The Art of Accommodation: Literary Translation in Russia* (Oxford, 2013), 235–64.

37. Poznansky, "Tchaikovsky as Communist Icon," 243. Here, Poznansky cites Iurii Nagibin's belletristic "Tchaikovskii: Final tragedii," published in *Megapolis-ekspres* in 1990, and "Taina zhizni i smerti Tchaikovskogo," published in *Niva* in 1991 by the émigré scholar Aleksandra Orlova, who had first aired her theories about the composer's suicide in the West in the early 1980s.

38. Anatolii Kuznetsov, "Korotko o knigakh," *Novyi mir* 5 (1994): 246. For the republication of Tchaikovskii's diaries, see Ip. I. Tchaikovskii, ed., *Dnevnik P. I. Tchaikovskogo, 1873–1891* (St. Petersburg, 1993). These were also reissued in 2000 as P. I. Tchaikovskii, *Dnevnik* (Moscow, 2000).

39. The original publication is Nina N. Berberova, *Tchaikovskii: Istoriia odinokoi zhizni* (Berlin, 1936). For the first of several editions published in post-Soviet Russia, see Berberova, *Tchaikovskii: Istoriia odinokoi zhizni* (St. Petersburg, 1993).

(Tchaikovskii's Suicide: The Myth and the Reality) set itself the task of debunking claims that the composer had taken his own life.<sup>40</sup> In the course of his task, however, Poznansky also found himself painting a more nuanced, sympathetic, and unvarnished account of Tchaikovskii's homosexuality than could ever have been countenanced in the Soviet period. Valerii Sokolov's *Antonina Tchaikovskaia: Istoriia zabytoi zhizni* (Antonina Tchaikovskaia: The Story of a Forgotten Life) appeared the following year, and in challenging widespread notions about the composer's marriage, it too shed further light on his sexuality. Then, in 1995, the Tchaikovsky State House Museum at Klin published a volume of articles, documents, and memoirs, including Sokolov's selection of a number of uncensored letters that allowed readers to read Tchaikovskii's own account of details of his private life for the first time.<sup>41</sup>

The appearance of revisionist works such as these created an environment in which Russian readers were presented with a radically different portrait of Tchaikovskii from the official one with which they had been brought up. To be sure, the scholarly nature of these publications meant that they tended to appear in only the most limited of print runs, but their contents were soon taken up in more popular works where they could have a correspondingly greater impact on a wider, non-specialist audience.<sup>42</sup> Described by its author as "a sort of aesthetic game, a literary provocation," Konstantin Rotikov's *Drugoi Peterburg* (The Other Petersburg, 1998) was one of the first pieces of post-Soviet writing to expose the city's hidden gay history.<sup>43</sup> Focusing particularly in the Silver Age, Rotikov's impressionistic, montage-like text includes a number of passages devoted to Tchaikovskii that are clearly derived from the work of Poznansky and others. Lev Klein's *Drugaiia storona svetila: Neobychnaia liubov' vydaiushchikhsia liudei. Rossiiskoe sozvezdie* (The Other Side of the Planet: The Unusual Love of Outstanding People. The Russian Constellation, 2002) devotes a substantial chapter to Tchaikovskii.<sup>44</sup> This work likewise drew on recent specialist scholarship.<sup>45</sup>

40. Aleksandr Poznansky, *Samoubiistvo Tchaikovskogo: Mif i real'nost'* (Moscow, 1993).

41. Valerii Sokolov, "Pis'ma P. I. Tchaikovskogo bez kupiur: Neizvestnye stranitsy epistolarii," in P. E. Vaidman et al., eds., *P. I. Tchaikovskii. Zabytoe i novoe: Vospominaniia sovremennikov: novye materialy i dokumenty* (Moscow, 1995), 118–34.

42. They also undoubtedly shaped the storyline and characterization behind Boris Eifman's ballet, *Tchaikovskii*, first performed in 1993 and restaged as *Tchaikovskii: Pro et contra* in 2016. See Baer, *Other Russias*, 101–2.

43. K. K. Rotikov, *Drugoi Peterburg* (St. Petersburg, 1998), 5; an updated version was released later as *Drugoi Peterburg: Kniga dlia chteniia v kresle* (St Petersburg, 2012).

44. L. S. Klein, *Drugaiia storona svetila: Neobychnaia liubov' vydaiushchikhsia liudei: Rossiiskoe sozvezdie* (St Petersburg, 2002), 215–44.

45. If the 1990s attested to a new wave of Tchaikovskii scholarship, then that tradition continues up to the present day. Three volumes of the composer's complete correspondence with fon Mekk have appeared in a thoroughly-annotated version edited by the late Polina Vaidman of the Tchaikovsky State House Museum at Klin (the concluding volumes are still forthcoming), and although these have contained few, if any, startling biographical disclosures, they still constitute an immeasurable improvement on Soviet-era editions (P. E. Vaidman, ed., *P. I. Tchaikovskii—N. F. fon Mekk: Perepiska*, 4 vols. [Cheliabinsk, 2007]). It is, however, Vaidman's publication of the complete correspondence between Tchaikovskii and his publisher, Petr Iurgenson, which has proved

Developments in the documentary study of Tchaikovskii's life have had a major impact on critical approaches too, probably the most significant of which has been Poznansky's 2009 Russian-language biography.<sup>46</sup> Although drawing primarily on the framework of his English-language biography of 1991, Poznansky complements this earlier work with recently declassified materials and a number of unpublished archival sources. Rejecting both the Soviet tradition of silence, and a western tendency to subscribe to unsubstantiated myth and rumor, Poznansky instead paints a view of the composer as a balanced and well-adjusted figure, largely untroubled by his homosexuality, and discreet and tactful in his erotic and romantic entanglements. This detailed and demythologizing work constitutes a fundamental revision to the prevailing image of Tchaikovskii in Russia and would have been important enough had it been limited to its initial appearance in a luxuriously-produced and illustrated print run of just 1100 copies. However, its inclusion the very next year in the land-mark *Zhizn' zamechatel'nykh liudei* series (Lives of Great People, often referred to by its Russian acronym of *ZhZL*) attests to a fundamental shift in the parameters of Tchaikovskii reception in Russia.<sup>47</sup> Now published in an initial print run of 5000 copies, Poznansky's biography was marketed as a work aimed at the general reader rather than the academic specialist or keen music lover. Moreover, the role played by the *ZhZL* series both in establishing an individual's canonical status and in framing a standard interpretation of his or her life and works illustrates the potential significance of his handling of Tchaikovskii's sexuality for biographical writing in Russia more generally.<sup>48</sup> With its judicious and unapologetic emphasis on the details of Tchaikovskii's private life and non-judgmental approach to the question of his homosexuality, Poznansky's interpretation now seemed poised to become the standard one.

to be the real revelation of early twenty-first-century scholarship (P. E. Vaidman, ed., *P. I. Tchaikovskii—P. I. Iurgenson: Perepiska v dvukh tomakh*, 2 vols. [Moscow, 2011–13]). Although a substantial number of their letters were published in two volumes in the Soviet era, these were heavily censored, not least because Iurgenson's in particular contained a number of anti-Semitic comments (P. I. Tchaikovskii, *Perepiska s P. I. Iurgenson*, eds. V. A. Zhdanov and N. T. Zhegin, 2 vols. [Moscow, 1938–52]). In their unexpurgated form, Tchaikovskii's letters reveal him to have been far more humorous and quick-witted than has often been appreciated (as well as far more in control of his finances than his reputation suggests). Moreover, his frequent use of profanity would almost certainly have put him on the wrong side of the 2014 law banning the use of a number of Russian swear words in public and in print.

46. Aleksandr Poznansky, *Petr Tchaikovskii: Biografiia*, 2 vols. (St Petersburg, 2009). A number of other works by Poznansky also appeared in Russia around this time. See his *Tchaikovskii v Peterburge* (St Petersburg, 2011) and *Smert' Tchaikovskogo: Legendy i fakty* (St. Petersburg, 2007).

47. Aleksandr Poznansky, *Tchaikovskii* (Moscow, 2010).

48. On the *ZhZL* series (with a particular focus on Pushkin, Dostoevskii, and Tolstoi), see the various contributions to Carol R. Ueland and Ludmilla Trigos, eds., "Forum: Literary Biographies in the *Lives of Remarkable People* Series (*Zhizn' zamechatel'nykh liudei*)," *Slavic and East European Journal* 60, no. 2 (Summer 2016): 205–83.

The copious documentation of the details of Tchaikovskii's personal life contained in post-Soviet publications more than amply disproves claims by Arabov and Medinskii that there is no evidence for his homosexuality. Nonetheless, members of the cultural and political elite continue to deny such evidence, and their claims are supported by media commentators, whose views echo and reinforce the official line. Significantly, much of this commentary has been by supposed medical experts and illustrates the extent to which public discussion of homosexuality in Russia still takes place within a context of pathologization. One of the earliest examples of this process is an interview with Latvian "sexologist and hypnologist," Jānis Zālītis, that appeared in *Komsomol'skaia Pravda* in February 2001. Zālītis—whose maternal grandmother is said to have worked at Tchaikovskii's house at Klin—subjects the composer's life and works to a pseudo-Freudian interpretation that leads him to assert that "neither in *Sleeping Beauty*, nor in *Swan Lake*, nor in any other of Petr Il'ich's compositions is there any hint of homosexuality." For Zālītis, Tchaikovskii's compositions do not so much express a deviant sexuality, as mark his success in translating *eros* into art: "Tchaikovskii's entire life is one of the sublimation (substitution) of sexual energy into creativity. . . . The composer lived for music, obtaining from it those same biochemical reactions in his body as he did from love. This is the direction I have employed almost throughout my life in psychotherapy, attempting to free people from dangerous habits—alcoholism, nicotine dependence, drugs."<sup>49</sup> Where Zālītis does refer to Tchaikovskii's personal life, it is to his brief involvement with the Belgian mezzo-soprano, Désirée Artôt, in 1868, which is interpreted as the psychological key to the rest of his life:

When Petr was 28, the famous French [sic] singer Désirée Artôt arrived on tour in Moscow. Once they had met, they became so involved with each other that it became a matter of engagement. But then, once she had left on tour for Poland, the singer unexpectedly married somebody else.

Let me remind you that Tchaikovskii's mother, née Assier, was French. A chance coincidence, or rather an image of the ideal woman, such as the mother becomes for the child in any normal family, and which had firmly established itself in his subconscious? Is this not the reason why the composer's attempt to marry the young pianist, Antonina Miliukova, in 1877 soon ended in failure?<sup>50</sup>

Zālītis has not been the only medical professional to set himself against the documentary evidence. In an interview published in the popular newspaper, *Argumenty i fakty*, on December 3, 2003, the president of the Moscow Academy of Psychotherapy, Mikhail Buianov, claimed to have "thoroughly studied all the archival documents about Tchaikovskii, his correspondence, and any references to his life by his contemporaries and in particular, it goes

49. Jānis Zālītis, "Tchaikovskii ne byl gomoseksualistom!," *Komsomol'skaia pravda*, February 12, 2001, <http://www.kp.ru/daily/22491/7604/> (last accessed December 20, 2017.)

50. Ibid.

without saying, by doctors, etc.”<sup>51</sup> Accordingly, he felt fully able to describe the notion that Tchaikovskii was gay as nothing more than “a vile slander.”<sup>52</sup>

The campaign to downplay or even disprove Tchaikovskii’s homosexuality continues to this day. In an interview with the psychologist, Svetlana Belicheva, which was published on November 5, 2014 by the online journal, *Kul'tura*, Tchaikovskii’s sexuality now found itself interpreted primarily through the prism of his creativity:

Of course, to discuss a great composer exclusively in the light of his sexual orientation is absurd. Even if the “facts” turned out to be true, this could hardly influence how his legacy is received. But as a psychologist I have always had my doubts. Such music—harmonious, radiant, restorative—could not have been written by a broken man. Although homosexuality is not a sin, neither is it normal. It is a sexual pathology which, like any illness, leaves an imprint on an artist’s creativity—there ought to be some sense of breakdown.<sup>53</sup>

Despite the fact that the Russian Ministry of Health ceased classifying homosexuality as a medical condition in 1999, it is still viewed by many people, even supposed medical professionals, as a moral or psychological abnormality.<sup>54</sup> Rather than accept the kind of details that have been revealed in any number of post-Soviet publications, experts such as Belicheva, Buianov, and Zālītis simply relegate them to the status of irrelevance. Thus, Putin’s claim that people love Tchaikovskii “because he was a great musician” is far from innocent, given that much recent discourse has preferred to present pseudo-psychological interpretations of Tchaikovskii’s works in order to present a sanitized, sexless vision of the composer’s personality that goes against the documented biographical record.

Such interviews reveal a further feature of contemporary Tchaikovskii reception in Russia, especially as far as the question of his sexuality is concerned: its presumed relationship to western criticism and scholarship. As Brian James Baer argues:

The sudden reappearance of homosexuality in Russian media after decades of silence . . . led many Russians to see homosexuality itself as a foreign borrowing, a pernicious effect of western capitalism and democracy. Homosexuality today continues to serve in Russia as a powerful symbol of the insidious spread of western values (and, many Russians believe, of the

51. Sergei Osipov, “Byl li Tchaikovskii gomoseksualistom?,” *Argumenty i fakty*, December 3, 2003, 25, (available at [http://gazeta.aif.ru/online/aif/1206/25\\_01](http://gazeta.aif.ru/online/aif/1206/25_01) (last accessed December 20, 2017)). In his “Waist-Deep: In the Mire of Russian and Western Debates about Tchaikovsky,” *Times Literary Supplement*, May 1, 2015, 14–15, Simon Morrison cites Buianov’s article as it appears on a Russian website in late 2010 (Eva Merkachevo, “Rossiiskie psikhiatry dokazali, chto Tchaikovskii ne byl geem,” November 5, 2010, at <http://korolevnews.ru/news/?id=857> (last accessed December 20, 2017)), rather than on the basis of its original publication some seven years earlier.

52. *Ibid.*

53. Dar’ia Efreмова, “Tchaikovskii: Kto prevratil geniia v geia?,” *Kul'tura*, November 5, 2014, at <http://portal-kultura.ru/articles/sensatsiya/68938-chaykovskiy-kto-prevratil-geniya-v-geya/> (last accessed December 20, 2017.)

54. Stella, *Lesbian Lives in Soviet and Post-Soviet Russia*, 1.

“western disease” of AIDS) and of Russia’s diminished virility—reflected not only in its loss of superpower status but also in plummeting birthrates and declining longevity, especially for Russian men.<sup>55</sup>

Because attitudes to homosexuality have become such a flashpoint when it comes to perceptions of the extent to which individual states do, or do not adhere to international norms, Tchaikovskii’s private life is frequently caught up in what Baer describes as “the burning question of Russia’s place in the new world order and of Russia’s relationship to modernity itself.”<sup>56</sup> Moreover, the Soviet period has also left its imprint on such discussions, since even before the criminalization of sexual acts between men in the early Stalin period, as Amico notes, “homosexuality was figured in spatial terms, located outside of Russia.”<sup>57</sup> Given the nostalgia for the Soviet past that has been such a feature of the Putin period, it is little surprise that such views should have resurfaced in contemporary Russia. Zālītis, for example, recalls hearing discussions of the composer’s sexuality on programs broadcast by *Voice of America*, “at the very time when homosexuality was being justified in the USA.”<sup>58</sup> Belicheva, referring explicitly to two of the most significant post-Soviet publications on the composer, similarly argues that their conclusions were determined by the context of their production:

These “stories” began to be spread in émigré circles by ladies of leisure who were unworthy of his [Tchaikovskii’s] attention. The rumor was subsequently picked up by Nina Berberova in an attempt to promote her own reputation. . . . But if Berberova based her views on rumors . . . then contemporary scholars have gone further. In his monograph *Tchaikovskii*, Aleksandr Poznansky is downright insistent that the composer was homosexual, drawing conclusions to this effect from the most innocent of facts.<sup>59</sup>

For Belicheva, Berberova’s biography was influenced by “the progressive nature of the western mind-set and the discoveries of Freud,” just as the time that Poznansky has spent in the United States has exposed him to such alien notions as “the legal recognition of same-sex marriage, genderless parents and the propaganda of homosexual relations.”<sup>60</sup> In a discursive field where homosexuality is widely perceived as a foreign import that runs contrary to Russian national values, it becomes almost impossible to accept not just the facts of Tchaikovskii’s personal life, but also that these have been so thoroughly established and documented by Russian scholars working within the Russian Federation itself.

55. Brian James Baer, *Translation and the Making of Modern Russian Literature* (New York, 2015), 137.

56. Baer, *Other Russias*, 36.

57. Amico, *Roll Over, Tchaikovsky!*, 69.

58. “Tchaikovskii ne byl gomoseksualistom!”

59. Efremova, “Tchaikovskii: Kto prevratil genia v geia?”

60. Ibid. Here, “genderless parents” renders the admittedly ambiguous Russian phrase *pronumerovannykh roditelei*, which in a number of online sources is typically juxtaposed with more traditional conceptions of maternity and paternity. Taruskin (“Introduction: My Wonderful World; or, Dismembering the Triad,” 26) prefers “multiple parenthood,” and Morrison (“Waist-Deep: In the Mire of Russian and Western Debates about Tchaikovsky”) opts for “numbered parenting.”

### **Tchaikovskii on the Russian Internet: Site of Resistance or Echo Chamber?**

To trace the reception of Tchaikovskii's biography solely through the prism of print culture and officially-sponsored or tolerated websites is to risk focusing solely on the public reactions of a self-selecting political, intellectual, and cultural elite, whether this is one minded to accept a more liberal interpretation of the composer's life and character, or one keen to resist such an account in favor of a more conservative line in tune with the homophobic, anti-western tone of Putin-era politics. Moreover, the limited print-runs of many post-Soviet publications, particularly during the crisis years of the 1990s when both the production and distribution of books in Russia were severely curtailed, mean that the extent of their impact on the general population can be hard to estimate; as with Soviet-era publications, mere existence is no guarantee of influence.

One way of assessing popular responses to the question of whether discussion of the composer's sexuality has any place in his biography is to follow blogs, postings, comments, and reviews on the Russian Internet. Although the anonymous nature of many of these makes it hard to assess the extent to which they are representative of wider social attitudes, the ability of ordinary citizens to voice their views using new media does represent one way of assessing how official discourse interacts with popular opinion. Where once, discussion of the details Tchaikovskii's personal life was confined to members of a small scholarly community, the rise of new technologies now means that anybody with access to an Internet connection can download and read frank and uncensored documents at their leisure. In the age of the new media and social networks, hierarchies of scholarly authority have given way to potentially more democratic structures of popular reception, as Robert A. Saunders notes: "With its precipitous growth in the 1990s, cyberspace began to enable a 'samizdat world' in which anyone with access to an Internet-enabled device and a modicum of knowledge about Web design could impact public and private opinion on almost any issue without the interference of government censorship, editorial review boards or any other information-regulating entity."<sup>61</sup> Moreover, the Internet represents a particularly productive venue where national and foreign views can intersect within the context of a globalized information network, and where the unconstrained circulation of information can clash with the desire for control and censorship on the part of individual states. As Sarah Oates observes:

The internet has distinctive elements that make it different from traditional broadcast and print media. The internet also offers a low-cost (often virtually no-cost) ability to distribute information to a potentially limitless global audience. In addition, it allows for potential freedom from editorial filters and controls. Finally, the nature of the internet facilitates relative freedom from national media restraints as well as the ability to build an international audience.<sup>62</sup>

61. Robert A. Saunders, "New Media, New Russians, New Abroad: The Evolution of Minority Russian Identity in Cyberspace," in Beumers, Hutchings, and Rulyova, eds., *The Post-Soviet Media: Conflicting Signals*, 203.

62. Sarah Oates, *Revolution Stalled: The Political Limits of the Internet in the Post-Soviet Sphere* (New York, 2013), 10.

This reference to “relative freedom from national media restraints” is a particularly significant one, given that much commentary on the operation of new media has been based on a presumption that they can help to create what Oates describes as “more informed—and potentially more empowered—citizens.”<sup>63</sup> Yet as Oates also suggests, “the internet can actually *impede* protest in non-free states,” and “the real asymmetry in power between repressive states and citizens lies in the ability of states to deploy the internet in a carefully choreographed manner that simultaneously promotes state interest through propaganda as well as discredits opponents via information campaigns of strategic takedowns of internet sites at critical political moments.”<sup>64</sup> Natalya Konradova and Henrike Schmidt make a similar point, tracing how attitudes to new media have evolved within Russia’s changing political climate:

If, for the early Runet elite, who possessed biographical experience of Soviet times, the internet was a technology and a communication environment offering individual freedom, not only in a direct political, but in a broader cultural context, for younger generations the internet made Russian culture truly global for perhaps the first time. At the same time, as Putin has gradually re-established a hierarchical structure in the social and media systems, the once autonomous Runet has turned into a strategic field of action for both sides—official authorities and opposition forces.<sup>65</sup>

If this ambiguity is true of virtual politics in the Russian Federation, it is true of the cultural field too, inseparable as it increasingly is from questions of ideology and national identity. When it comes to the popular reception of Tchaikovskii’s biography, the internet represents a site of both resistance to and reinforcement of the official line, just as it replicates the kind of equivocal attitudes to the public discussion of homosexuality documented above.

As the most prominent and most readily available piece of scholarship dealing frankly with Tchaikovskii’s sexuality, Poznansky’s biography may serve as a useful test case here. Although the three reviews of the original 2009 edition and the seven of the 2010 *ZhZL* reissue currently listed on the ozon.ru website can in no way be considered a complete or representative sample, they nonetheless offer a useful snapshot of public opinion. Reaction to the 2009 edition was uniformly enthusiastic, with all three reviewers giving it a maximum of five stars. The first review, posted on April 11, 2009, described it as “a terrific book. Tchaikovskii comes across in a totally new light—alive and real, and it forces you to reassess his life and work again . . .”<sup>66</sup> Just over two months later, on 16 June, a second reader concurred with this assessment: “An easy-going style, the precision and aptness of the quotations, the thoughtful way in which the important events in Tchaikovskii’s life are treated—all of this

63. *Ibid.*, 28.

64. *Ibid.*, 11 (emphasis original).

65. Natalya Konradova and Henrike Schmidt, “From the Utopia of Autonomy to a Political Battlefield: Towards a History of the ‘Russian Internet,’” in Michael S. Gorham, Ingunn Lunde and Martin Paulsen, eds., *Digital Russia: The Language, Culture and Politics of New Media Communication* (London, 2014), 49.

66. <http://www.ozon.ru/context/detail/id/4366973/> (last accessed December 20, 2017).

is of undoubted interest.”<sup>67</sup> Another reviewer was more circumspect in her November review: “I read the book in a single sitting! An equivocal impression—many details of his personal intimate life. It seems to me that there is too little about the composer’s creative process however.”<sup>68</sup> Something of the difficulty of using such comments can be seen from the fact that the first two are most likely fictitious, inasmuch as neither individual has reviewed anything else on the ozon.ru website. Indeed, Tchaikovskii scholars will immediately recognize their names as playfully pseudonymous: Sergei Kireev was, according to Modest Tchaikovskii, “the strongest, most durable, and purest amorous infatuation of his entire life,” and Sasha Davydova was the composer’s sister, Aleksandra.<sup>69</sup>

When one turns to the 2010 *ZhZL* version (a reissue of the 2009 version, but this time without footnotes or illustrations, and published as a single, compact, and more readily affordable volume), one encounters a more variegated set of reactions, as well as one that reflects official discourses more closely. Writing in March 2011, one reviewer welcomed Poznansky’s approach, arguing that “the author has lifted the veil for us—and rightly so, and I, at least, find this interesting.”<sup>70</sup> The previous October, an earlier reviewer had also praised the biography: “There is a lot that is new in it, and about things that have never yet been written about. It is a timely book, and a brave one. And the main thing is that the author has treated the great composer’s unusual private life with respect and love.”<sup>71</sup> Other readers were less impressed, however, and their criticisms tended to revolve primarily around the question of Tchaikovskii’s sexuality. One reader found himself “rather bothered by the author’s particular interest in the composer’s ‘well-known inclinations,’” suggesting that “against the backdrop of the music that the composer wrote, his ‘sins’ are simply as imperceptible as sunspots, especially when looked at from a distance of more than 100 years.”<sup>72</sup> Another reviewer was yet more outraged:

So far I have only managed to finish the start of the book—I got up to Tchaikovskii’s graduation from the School of Jurisprudence and PUT IT DOWN. I simply got fed up of reading about homosexualists and the impression that the world consists only of them. . . . I read Berberova before this, but there everything is much more veiled. I VENERATE TCHAIKOVSKI’S genius. But there must be some limits when it comes to where the emphasis is placed.<sup>73</sup>

Another reader complained that “the author basically limits himself to Tchaikovskii’s private life, and moreover, almost exclusively to the gay theme.”<sup>74</sup> All of these reviews predate the anti-propaganda legislation passed

67. *Ibid.*

68. *Ibid.*

69. Alexander Poznansky, ed., *Tchaikovsky through Others’ Eyes*, trans. Ralph C. Burr, Jr. and Robert Bird (Bloomington, 1999), 23.

70. <http://www.ozon.ru/context/detail/id/5321993/> (last accessed December 20, 2017).

71. *Ibid.*

72. *Ibid.*

73. *Ibid.*

74. *Ibid.*

in the summer of 2013, but a further one was posted in November 2014, thus illustrating something of the evolving debate about the appropriateness of discussing Tchaikovskii's sexuality in public:

The topic is of interest to the author above all. Tchaikovskii is in second place, even in third. It is completely obvious that the book's author is attempting to justify his own inclinations by writing a biography of the great composer. It's not so difficult to copy some piquant facts from existing sources, and it's even easier to insert some linking sentences. Probably the hardest thing is to get publishers interested. The publisher, in turn, is interested in how profitable his product is, that is, he needs to find something that will be of interest to the reader. The reader is basically interested in who slept with whom, when, where, and so forth. Alas. . . . So A. N. Poznansky has rather miscalculated—it would be nice to read how the music was created, and instead we are offered street-cleaners with their pants down. It's worse than bad.<sup>75</sup>

With its sense of moral outrage and personal offence, insistence on creativity rather than on biographical details, and lament at the impact of free-market capitalism on cultural values, this last review is very much in keeping with the government line as expressed by Putin and Medinskii.

The short reviews posted on *ozon.ru* offer brief reactions by readers to a given book, but do not offer much opportunity for more sustained and reflective dialogue and debate. For this, one needs to turn to more substantial blogs and webpages, of which a significant number are devoted to the question of “whether Tchaikovskii was gay or not.” Here, the encounter between readers' expectations of the biographical genre and the documentary reality can be acutely felt. The website *livelib.ru* describes itself as “the largest collection of reviews on the Russian Internet” and offers readers a collective platform for discussing books they have recently read. Its first review of Poznansky's biography was posted on November 8, 2012, and attracted fourteen replies, most of which focused on the nature of Tchaikovskii's relationship with his patron, Nadezhda fon Mekh (evidence not just of how important this episode was in the composer's life, but also how prominently it has always featured in biographical treatments of that life, from Modest Tchaikovskii onwards). Nonetheless, it is the question of the composer's sexuality that forms the most significant theme in the original review. The reviewer had purchased Poznansky's biography in search of information as to “how he lived, with whom he associated, how his involvement with music came about, what kind of person he was,” and expected to find such information in a book published as part of the *ZhZL* series.<sup>76</sup> To her great surprise, however, she found that it was “dedicated solely to the composer's homosexual predilections.”<sup>77</sup> To be sure, reading the book was not entirely a negative experience, and the review praised its author, who “has a wonderful command of his material, has explored the depth and breadth of all the archives and achieved a great piece of work.”<sup>78</sup> But her reservations remained: “It's just that it should have been

75. *Ibid.*

76. <http://www.livelib.ru/book/1000497273/reviews> (last accessed December 20, 2017)

77. *Ibid.*

78. *Ibid.*

called something else. *The Life of Gays in Nineteenth-Century Russia through the Example of a Single Biography*, for example. Then the right sort of readers would have found it and not been disappointed as I was.”<sup>79</sup>

Reviews on literary websites tend to be relatively measured, perhaps because readers who have invested time and money in a particular book may already be predisposed to at least consider its methods and conclusions, even if they disagree with them (such is the attitude of the last cited reviewer, whose tone is largely charitable, giving credit to the documentary foundations of Poznansky’s biography, as well as the thoroughness of his interpretations). Other websites, by contrast, illustrate a more polemical side to contemporary Tchaikovskii reception. One example would be the personal site of journalist and photographer, Valerii Mishakov, which contains a substantial article entitled “Strashnaia taina smerti Tchaikovskogo: Byl li velikii kompozitor gomoseksualistom i pedofilom?” (“The Terrible Secret of Tchaikovskii’s Death: Was the Great Composer a Homosexual and Pedophile?”)<sup>80</sup> Mishakov’s article is characteristic of many websites in that it largely recycles existing narratives with an admixture of gossip and speculation. However, what lifts his contribution above the average is his inclusion of uncensored extracts from Tchaikovskii’s correspondence (as previously published by Valerii Sokolov), as well as a substantial interview with Poznansky, whose *Smert’ Tchaikovskogo: Legendy i fakty* had recently been published.

The tone of the comments generated by this article was predictably heated. For some, the issue revolved around the ethics of reading private documents, with one respondent arguing that “an unhealthy curiosity about someone else’s bed is an unworthy cause, to put it mildly.”<sup>81</sup> For this reader, even if such documents disclosed the truth, “this in no way diminishes the beastliness of the very fact of digging around in somebody else’s dirty laundry. Equally abominable are those historians and archivists who read private correspondence. No historical or artistic interest can justify such intrusion.”<sup>82</sup> For others, the documents themselves were clearly forgeries: “the letters . . . clearly aren’t written by Tchaikovskii. Another hand can be seen at work here, since the author’s style is terribly debased.”<sup>83</sup> There was, moreover, no need “to look at falsified epistolary documents,” since lovers of Tchaikovskii’s music had another source at their disposal: “one can simply look at Tchaikovskii’s face. There isn’t the slightest trace of corruption or debauchery. Tchaikovskii was morally and physically a virgin.”<sup>84</sup> Such comments attest to the fact that in the 1990s and early 2000s, the declassification of previously censored or unpublished documents had presented a very different image of Tchaikovskii from the one with which most readers were familiar. Although published in very small print runs, such documents circulated widely—either in extract or in complete form—on the Internet, which had the potential of magnifying scholarly debate so that it became

79. Ibid.

80. <http://v-mishakov.ru/chajkovsky.html> (last accessed December 20, 2017).

81. Ibid.

82. Ibid.

83. Ibid.

84. Ibid.

a topic of broader public interest. Moreover, it was clearly not the documents themselves that troubled such readers, given that Soviet scholarship was itself based on the extensive use of primary sources, often collected in multivolume critical editions. Rather, it was the content of such documents that offended, and the sense that scholars and archivists had transgressed against propriety and traditions of self-censorship.

A far darker tone can be found in other comments, where homophobia, anti-western sentiment, and even antisemitism are aligned. As one respondent to Mishakov's article punningly and unpleasantly suggested: "And all the studies come from beyond the hillock . . . Sorry—I meant from the west. Orlova was an emigrant. Yale University—that's where Naval'nyi studied . . . But then, who else but the west would go digging around in all of this gay stuff."<sup>85</sup> Here, the suggestion is that Aleksandra Orlova (who, on emigration to the west in 1979, promoted the theory that Tchaikovskii had taken his life after a scandal involving the son of a courtier), Poznansky (who works in the Slavic and East European collections at Yale University library), and Aleksei Naval'nyi (one of Russia's most prominent opposition activists, who was named one of Yale's World Fellows in 2010) are all part of some anti-Russian conspiracy that seeks to defame one of the nation's most prominent cultural heroes. Indeed, many of Orlova's most virulent critics resort to anti-Semitic slurs to discredit her claims. In a long article, "Tchaikovskii i pederasty" ("Tchaikovskii and the Pederasts"), posted on livejournal.com in late September 2013, Anatolii Glazunov refers to her offensively as "the Jewess [*zhidovinka*] Shneerson."<sup>86</sup> Another website hosted an entire article arguing that "the slander of Tchaikovskii's homosexuality . . . has a markedly Jewish origin," and describing Orlova in particular as "a certain Jewess [*evreika*] from the Shneerson family."<sup>87</sup>

The argument that Tchaikovskii's homosexuality is the product of unsubstantiated rumors within the Russian émigré community has been amply disproved by the substantial body of scholarship that has originated within Russia itself, both before and especially after 1991. In response to a suggestion that Orlova and Poznansky were the only sources of such information, Mishakov replied by asking: "What about Sokolov? And the Tchaikovskii House Museum in Klin?"<sup>88</sup> Indeed, the fundamental scholarship carried out at the Tchaikovsky State House Museum in Klin has become something of a leitmotif in contemporary discussions of the composer's sexuality, even though its publications are decidedly sober and unsensationalist in their handling of the issue (unlike Orlova, whose claims have been largely rejected by academic specialists). At the height of the 2013 scandal, the newspaper *Moskovskii komsomolets* even telephoned the

85. Ibid. There is an untranslatable homonym here, in that the Russian phrase "iz-za bugra" can also be rendered as "from the other side of the bugger."

86. <http://a-glazunov.livejournal.com/31515.html> (last accessed December 20, 2017). Glazunov's views are continued at <http://a-glazunov.livejournal.com/31819.html> (last accessed December 20, 2017).

87. <http://www.kramola.info/vesti/rusy/evrei-pripisali-chajkovskomu-merzost> (last accessed December 20, 2017).

88. <http://v-mishakov.ru/chajkovsky.html> (last accessed December 20, 2017).

museum for its view and was referred directly to Poznansky's *Samoubiistvo Tchaikovskogo: Mifi real'nost'*, itself already twenty years old by this point: "This book was written on the basis of documents that are to be found in the museum at Klin and is not false,' we were assured by the researchers there."<sup>89</sup> In another article posted earlier that day, the paper quoted the opinion of the late Polina Vaidman, the museum's then head of research: "There is a vast body of literature, his letters have been published without any cuts . . . and three years ago a book, *Neizvestnyi Tchaikovskii* (The Unknown Tchaikovskii), came out. It's all written in black and white. . . . It has been a widely accepted fact since the nineteenth century that he was homosexual."<sup>90</sup>

In addition to readers' reviews and private webpages, a third forum for discussion of Tchaikovskii's sexuality have been the online platforms of the Russian media, which in addition to running stories about the debate, have hosted responses from their audiences. In late September 2013, for instance, the radio station *Ekho Moskvy* hosted a poll under the title "Nuzhko li skryvat' temu seksual'noi orientatsii Petra Tchaikovskogo?" ("Should the Topic of Petr Tchaikovskii's Sexuality be Concealed?"). As the leading media outlet of Russia's liberal opposition, *Ekho Moskvy* might be seen as unrepresentative of the country as a whole. Moreover, the title of its poll certainly takes Tchaikovskii's homosexuality to be an undisputed fact; its main focus is whether or not it is a fit subject for public discussion. Predictably, the poll provoked a wide variety of often lively responses (some seventy-one in total, all posted over the course of four days between September 19 and 22). Relatively few people tackled the question as it was originally put, with only a minority of respondents commenting on whether Tchaikovskii's sexuality was a proper topic for biographical treatment or artistic representation (still fewer wondered whether there was any relationship between his personal life and his creative work). Many individuals recalled how they had first learned that Tchaikovskii was gay, often citing Soviet-era rumor and anecdotes that bypassed official censorship. Other participants took the opportunity to cut and paste extracts from key publications, citing such works as Berberova's biography, the composer's uncensored diaries and letters, and comments by leading scholars. A third group fiercely denied the factual accuracy of this material altogether, suggesting—in the words of one contributor—that "there are no such documents, it's all a vile lie, which was invented in our day to justify vile perversions!"<sup>91</sup>

89. "Byl li Tchaikovskii gomoseksualistom?" *Moskovskii komsomolets*, September 19, 2013, at <http://www.mk.ru/culture/article/2013/09/19/918313-byil-li-chaykovskiy-gomoseksualistom.html> (last accessed December 22, 2017).

90. "Glavnyi spetsialist po Tchaikovskomu oprovergla Medinskogo: kompozitor byl gomoseksualistom," *Moskovskii komsomolets*, September 19, 2013, at <http://www.mk.ru/culture/music/news/2013/09/19/918270-glavnyiy-spetsialist-po-chaykovskomu-oprovergla-medinskogo-kompozitor-byil-gomoseksualistom.html> (last accessed December 22, 2017).

91. <http://echo.msk.ru/polls/1160360-echo/comments.html#comments> (last accessed December 22, 2017).

## The Uses of Queer Biography

In an interview with Russian *GQ* (the glossy men's magazine, *Gentlemen's Quarterly*) in March 2015, Kirill Serebrennikov expressed his belief that his biopic would eventually be made.<sup>92</sup> A report in *Izvestiia* even suggested that, contrary to statements made by the director, the Ministry of Culture had extended its offer of financial support for the film until summer 2017.<sup>93</sup> It remains to be seen what kind of film might eventually result, especially in the context of the anti-gay-propaganda legislation of 2013. For the time being, Serebrennikov has channeled elements of his proposed biopic into two very different films. The first of these is *(M)uchenik* (*The Student*, although the Russian title also incorporates the word *Martyr*, 2016), which depicts the violence wrought by a teenage Christian fundamentalist in a Russian high school. The film's most obvious transgression is to expose what Serebrennikov sees as the power and hypocrisy of the Orthodox Church in contemporary Russia, yet it touches on the question of homosexuality too, most notably in a subplot involving the sexually ambiguous nature of the main character's relationship with a male disciple figure, but also in a number of explicit references to the anti-gay legislation and its impact on the pastoral role of teachers. If *(M)uchenik* is an intensely melodramatic, even confrontational piece of film-making, then *Fonograf* (*The Phonograph*, 2016) is a playful *jeu d'esprit*. Running to a little under seven minutes, it imagines the scene when, in 1890, Tchaikovskii—along with the singer Elizaveta Lavrovskaiia, the composer Anton Rubinshtein, the conductor and pianist Vasilii Safonov, and the pianist Aleksandra Gubert—made a short recording on an Edison phonograph for Julius Block. The Block cylinder—lost until 1997, when it turned up in Pushkinskii Dom in St. Petersburg—purports to be the only recording of Tchaikovskii's voice and hence projects an aura of biographical authenticity.<sup>94</sup> Filmed in period costume and starring some of Russia's most renowned actors (the role of Tchaikovskii is taken by Evgenii Mironov, for instance), *Fonograf* presents a chaste and historically appealing vision of the composer that, precisely because of its tact and delicacy, seems more in keeping with official calls for an idealized approach to the telling of his life. Serebrennikov's interest in biography—and especially in queer biography—has informed his work in the theater too. Early in 2017, plans were announced for a new ballet, commissioned by Moscow's Bol'shoi theater, that would treat the life and work of

92. "Kirill Serebrennikov: 'Eto dazhe khorosho, chto seichas nam plokho,'" *GQ* Russia, at [http://www.gq.ru/culture/theatre/106046\\_kirill\\_serebrennikov\\_eto\\_dazhe\\_khorosho\\_chno\\_seychas\\_nam\\_plokho.php](http://www.gq.ru/culture/theatre/106046_kirill_serebrennikov_eto_dazhe_khorosho_chno_seychas_nam_plokho.php) (last accessed December 22, 2017).

93. "Serebrennikov ne otkazalsia ot gosdeneg dlia s'emok 'Tchaikovskogo,'" *Izvestiia*, May 13, 2015, at <http://izvestia.ru/news/586305> (last accessed December 22, 2017).

94. The recording is discussed in P. E. Vaidman, "My uslyshali golos Tchaikovskogo," in P. E. Vaidman and G. I. Belonovich, eds., *P. I. Tchaikovskii: Al'manakh. Vyp. 2: Zabytoe i novoe* (Klin, 2003), 393–97; V. N. Denisov, "O fonograficheskoi zapisi golosa P. I. Tchaikovskogo iz kollektsii sobiratel'ia Iuliusa Bloka," *Vestnik udmurtskogo universiteta: Seriya istoriia i filologiya* 26, no. 4 (2016): 135–40; and—from the perspective of Rubinshtein's involvement—István Horváth-Thomas and Christoph Flamm, "Es gibt keine Schallaufnahmen von Anton Rubinštejn. Oder doch?," *Mitteilungen der Tschaikowsky-Gesellschaft* 23 (2016): 133–39.

Rudolf Nureyev and which was explicitly referred to as a “biopic.”<sup>95</sup> By the summer, however, the premiere of the ballet had been postponed, allegedly on the orders of Medinskii, because of its evocation of Nureyev’s homosexuality.<sup>96</sup> It eventually opened on December 9, playing to an audience made up of Moscow’s cultural and political elite. Meanwhile, Serebrennikov remained under house arrest on grounds of alleged embezzlement (as he does at the time of writing).

Yet to see the issue of Tchaikovskii’s private life as primarily biographical may be to fall victim to a kind of methodological positivism, relating primarily to whether certain facts are true or not. It is undoubtedly the case that the careful documentary work of Russian scholars has long established the “truth” about Tchaikovskii’s homosexuality, and to debate the matter lends credence to those who might seek to deny it. What matters as much, if not more, is the how such evidence is used, and this is why the current debate in the press and online is such an intense one. In the history of modern homosexuality, the music of Tchaikovskii and the details of his biography have played a crucial role in creating a powerful emotional, affective, and aesthetic narrative that has contributed to the understanding and acceptance of same-sex desire.<sup>97</sup> Accordingly, the discussion of queer biography in contemporary Russia has the potential to become an important political strategy in the struggle for equal rights.<sup>98</sup> Therefore, when critics deny the relevance of Tchaikovskii’s sexuality for an understanding of his music, what they are seeking to do is to reclaim the life from the uses to which it has so notably been put in the past, at least in the west. And what of Russia’s victimized queer communities? Would greater public discussion of Tchaikovskii’s sexuality serve to legitimize their identities and practices? As Lev Klein put it in the preface to his *Drugaia storona svetila* in 2002: “If this is a sin which can be forgiven in the great and the good, then why do we not forgive it in our neighbor?”<sup>99</sup> It is a tempting argument, and one which accords well with western-style identity politics, yet as Baer cautions, “for many Russian gays and lesbians . . . the right to privacy was seen as one of the great promises of the post-Soviet era, after the brutal intrusions by the Soviet regime on the private lives of its citizens.”<sup>100</sup>

95. “Serebrennikov rasskazal o svoei postanovke ‘Nureyev’ v Bol’shom teatre,” *Interfax*, February 4, 2017, at <http://www.interfax.ru/culture/548474> (last accessed December 22, 2017).

96. “Balet Serebrennikov ‘Nureyev’ v Bol’shom mogli zapretit’ iz-za gomoseksualizma,” *Moskovskii komsomolets*, July 8, 2017, at <http://www.mk.ru/culture/2017/07/08/balet-serebrennikova-nureev-v-bolshom-mogli-zapretit-izza-gomoseksualizma.html> (last accessed December 22, 2017); and “Medinskii podderzhal reshenie rukovodstva Bol’shogo teatra otlozhit’ prem’eru ‘Nureyeva,’” *TASS*, July 10, 2017, at <http://tass.ru/kultura/4402923> (last accessed December 22, 2017).

97. Judith A. Peraino, *Listening to the Sirens: Musical Technologies of Queer Identity from Homer to Hedwig* (University of California Press, 2006), 77–92.

98. On the genre of queer biography and other forms of cultural and historical memory, see Dan Healey, *Russian Homophobia from Stalin to Sochi* (London, 2018), especially Chapter 8, “Shame, Pride, and ‘Non-traditional’ Lives: The Dilemmas of Queering Russian Biography,” 177–94.

99. Klein, *Drugaia storona svetila*, 11.

100. Baer, *Translation and the Making of Modern Russian Literature*, 159.

Whether or not, as Baer contends, “the association of homosexuality with a protected private sphere . . . may solidify the foundations of a political positioning not only against rising authoritarianism but also against the dehumanizing forces of neoliberal economics,” public discussion of Tchaikovskii’s sexuality may require a degree of tact and delicacy, not for reasons of prudery or self-censorship, but because the stakes for many individuals are, unfortunately, still so high.<sup>101</sup>

Perhaps, then, the overriding motivation for commissioning an official film version of the composer’s life—a form oddly redolent of Soviet-era biopics featuring politically-correct interpretations of national heroes—may be that it serves to impose a single and standardized narrative on an unruly historical subject, as well as establishing a sanitized and uniform interpretation of his life after a period of considerable critical freedom. In this sense, Putin-era Tchaikovskii reception recalls the evolution of the composer’s reputation in the Soviet period, when a period of relatively unconstrained documentary freedom was followed by a more carefully-controlled campaign of top-down legitimization within strictly-determined ideological limits. At the same time, a combination of forceful denial, accusations of forgery, and the recourse to inflammatory and derogatory language makes for a discursive field that is often profoundly homophobic in tone. Websites and blogposts with titles such as “Gde dokazatel’stva gomoseksual’nosti Tchaikovskogo?” (“Where is the proof of Tchaikovskii’s homosexuality?”), or “Sodomity, otstan’te ot Tchaikovskogo!” (“Sodomites, Keep Away from Tchaikovskii!”) amply corroborate Elena Baraban’s argument that “contemporary mass culture . . . acts as one of the mechanisms compensating for the Russian government’s loss of the function to define and prosecute homosexuality as a social ‘anomaly.’”<sup>102</sup> There is, of course, a major question about how knowledge of Tchaikovskii’s homosexuality might potentially feed into scholarly consideration of his compositions, but for the time being, the acrid tone of the debate seems to preclude a more thorough discussion of the principles and practice of biographical writing, particularly when it comes to Russia’s queer subjects, both past and present.

101. *Ibid.*, 161.

102. <http://svyatoslav.livejournal.com/397157.html> and <http://moskalkov-opera.livejournal.com/678139.html> (last accessed December 22, 2017); Elena Baraban, “Obyknovennaia gomofobiia,” *Neprikosnovennyi zapas* 5, no. 19 (2001), cited in Baer, *Other Russias*, 15.