Tchaikovsky's Suicide: Myth and Reality

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Leon Edel, one of the most prominent biographers of our age, has observed regarding the nature of the life-writing enterprise:

The art of literary biography demands a constant weighing and examination of evidence—if we have it. Otherwise we can only speculate and try to be inductive. And it all depends how it is done, with what skill and clarity. . . . The passionate life of a biographical subject is a distinct part of his or her total being.1

This observation is eminently true for any attempt to approach the biographical data available concerning Piotr Il'ich Tchaikovsky. Especially as viewed by those of his own time, the composer's "private life was always surrounded by a kind of haze and mysterious mist," as one contemporary suggested.2 Such a perception is understandable. Tchaikovsky's homosexuality and the secrecy it entailed necessarily created about him an aura of something inexpressible, yet meaningful, giving rise to all manner of rumor and gossip.

This does not mean, however, that such rumors and gossip, or the various legends and myths they have engendered, should be taken as historical truth. Material of this nature, which is much like folklore, must be subjected to rigorous scrutiny before any responsible judgments can be made.

The more surprising, then, is the enthusiastic response of a number of Western musicologists and journalists to the sensational theories proposed by the émigré Soviet musicologist Alexandra Orlova.3 The publicity given to her

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views on Tchaikovsky’s death initially provoked a heated controversy in the press, yet no extensive scholarly analysis of these matters has ever been published.4

In the present study I shall attempt to demonstrate not only various implausibilities in Mrs. Orlova’s thesis of the composer’s enforced suicide, but also to suggest that the diverse evidence available to us, far from supporting such a thesis, in fact gives every reason to regard it as utterly improbable.5 Indirectly, this study may also be taken as a comment upon the interaction between popular mythology and the scholarly enterprise—an issue relevant as well to areas beyond that of biographical writing.6

The essence of Orlova’s argument is that all his life Tchaikovsky was tormented by his sexual preferences, and that this torment was directly responsible for his tragic end. Shortly before his death, we are told, the composer entered into an affair with a young nobleman and was threatened with exposure. To avoid an impending scandal that might have affected the prestige of the School of Jurisprudence, from which he had graduated more than thirty years earlier, he was subjected to a self-appointed “court of honor” composed of a group of his former classmates and forced to take his own life by poison.7

Rumors about Tchaikovsky’s alleged suicide have existed for nearly a century. In various forms and versions they had already surfaced in prerevolutionary Russia and abroad. None of the composer’s relatives or close friends living on either side of the “iron curtain,” nor any serious scholar, has ever attached the slightest importance to them.8

These allegations have nonetheless survived. This can be explained only by default. The fact is that no scholar has as yet made any serious attempt to assess the complex predicament of the composer’s psychosexuality. This issue, however, is the key to a proper understanding of the vicissitudes of Tchaikovsky’s private and inner life, including his attitudes toward suicide. The “suicide” rumors revived within the particular conditions of the Soviet Union, where access to data on the private lives of famous people, however long dead, is often deliberately restricted by authorities, so that oral tradition frequently becomes the only source of information. Verification of such rumors, moreover, is all but impossible, and in time they may undergo innumerable distortions, to emerge at last in wildly exotic and convoluted forms.9

In treating Tchaikovsky’s death, since the official cholera version is now questioned and nefarious intentions from various quarters are now implied, a combination of approaches, the historical and the detective, is needed.10 This latter presupposes the consideration of both external, or circumstantial, evidence and inner motivation as a prerequisite for solving criminal cases. In the event that all external and circumstantial evidence against a suspect is successfully refuted, he must then be acquitted, whatever motives he may have out for committing the alleged crime. Mutatis mutandis, the same principle has to be followed in the case of a suspected suicide: if the actual evidence for suicide is disproved, existence of motive becomes irrelevant. The weight of refutation should therefore be placed on demolishing Orlova’s presumed evidence of a conspiratorial plot and subsequent suicide by poison. In the end, one must bear in mind the old criminalological maxim that if even a single fact cannot be encompassed by a theory, that theory has then to be unequivocally rejected.

This is not to say that I accept Mrs. Orlova’s allegations that Tchaikovsky, a “martyr” to his homosexuality, was psychologically prepared to take his own life in a moment of serious crisis. The assumption of his perennial homosexual torment is somewhat superficial: he was far too complex a personality to be reduced to such a stereotype. The framework of this essay does not allow for an adequate treatment of Tchaikovsky’s inner psychosexual and spiritual predicament. That constitutes an altogether independent—albeit related—field of study, one requiring painstaking and voluminous argumentation.11

Only certain brief observations can be offered here. If Mrs. Orlova’s view is to be accepted, it must be proved that the composer was consistently anxious to overcome his “anomaly,” not only during his marital crisis of 1876–77, but throughout the whole of his life.12 Yet the fact is that he eventually came to see his sexual peculiarities as an insurmountable and even natural part of his personality.13 Thus he wrote to his brother Anatolii from Florence on 13/25 February 1878: “Only now, especially after the story of my marriage, have I finally begun to under-
stand that there is nothing more fruitless than not wanting to be that which I am by nature."

After this we encounter no manifestation of anxiety with regard to homosexuality in any of his published texts. It is my contention that, as with a great number of his contemporaries of similar sexual mold, Tchaikovsky gradually succeeded in adjusting his inner circumstances to the societal conditions of his time without experiencing any serious psychological damage. Contrary to popular opinion, there seem to have existed in the late nineteenth century several quiet patterns of accommodation for persons with outlawed erotic tastes who were not eager to display them openly. Such a view is argued by the social historian Peter Gay with respect to Victorian sensibilities:

After all, behind the sheltering façade of discretion many nineteenth-century male and female homosexuals defined their own forbidden ways of loving, enjoyed a privileged space of impunity for their unorthodox amorous arrangements.  

Orlova alleges that the composer suffered from an agonizing fear of "public exposure." This too, however, is not such a simple question. Tchaikovsky knew well that, whatever precautions might be taken, the obnoxious gossip and rumors about him continued to circulate and always would do so. Thus the degree of "publicity" becomes merely a matter of definition. Much more is needed to make plausible Mrs. Orlova's extravagant assertion that in 1893 the composer would for patriotic reasons have chosen to take his own life rather than go abroad—in contrast to a pattern of behavior adopted fifteen years earlier to avert a potential scandal after his disastrous marriage. Orlova's few comments on this are clearly far from sufficient.

Also found wanting is a major argument to the effect that at the time of his death Tchaikovsky, for whatever reasons, was so deeply miserable as to allow his suicidal impulses to outweigh numerous creative projects which are known to us. There is not a shred of evidence to support such a conjecture, and much in fact contradicts it: Tchaikovsky had by this time reached the pinnacle of his fame, enjoying a kind of "superstar" status; in addition, his profound love for his nephew Bob Davydov, far from being tragic, must have given him great emotional and spiritual satisfaction.

The "conspiracy-cum-suicide" story offered by Mrs. Orlova can make sense only if a variety of factors are shown to have existed beyond doubt. As far as external circumstances are concerned, her picture of nineteenth-century Russia has yet to be confirmed. She sees the Russia of that time as a sexually repressive society where unorthodox passions might eventually lead a person to public and social destruction. For her this is historical reality—which, as I shall argue, it was not. She goes on to assume that her murderous "conspiracy" was prompted by an outraged aristocratic family prepared to risk national scandal for the sake of humiliating the great musician, instead of negotiating the matter quietly in their own interests. Such an assumption is far from manifest. And she asserts that the former classmates, many of them cultivated and highly intelligent men, chose to prefer an anachronistic concept, the "honor of the uniform," to the invaluable life of a world-famous artist. Such a commitment, by virtue of its sheer improbability, ought to be extensively documented, and that has not been done here. In fact, just the opposite can be proved—that the students of the School of Jurisprudence traditionally cared little about sexual proprieties.

It has also to be established, with respect to the last few days before Tchaikovsky's illness, whether the whole account of his busy routine, inconceivable in the case of a man preparing to die, is a later fabrication, or else that the frail composer possessed unprecedented capacities of endurance and concealment. As for the actual means of execution, it would have to be demonstrated that in St. Petersburg in the autumn of 1893 a poison was available that could be appropriately administered to produce symptoms similar to those of cholera. As we shall see, this toxicological issue is a difficult one. Mrs. Orlova's thesis proposes that at least two prominent physicians were talked into joining the conspiracy in violation of the Hippocratic oath, thereby risking their reputations. The logic of circumstances also would imply a degree of connivance on the part of the authorities; otherwise such a thorough covering up of the whole affair would have been impossible. Finally, Mrs. Orlova's arguments concerning the composer's medical treatment ought to be
unimpeachable. She insists that preventive measures against cholera were not observed during his illness or in the aftermath; that there are irreconcilable contradictions between the accounts of Tchaikovsky’s doctor and his brother, and that the controversy in the press was inspired primarily by suspicion of a suicide. All these assertions can be challenged in terms of both logic and empirical data.

Only the unique interaction of all these components, none of them irrefutably proved, might make a “conspiracy-suicide” theory tenable. Let us now address each of these factors in turn for as detailed an examination as the scope of this study will permit.

II

In her latest Russian contribution Mrs. Orlova has somewhat retreated from her previously held view that under the harsh conditions of Tsarist government exposure threatened Tchaikovsky “with the loss of all his rights, with exile to Siberia, with inevitable disgrace.” This initial assumption lent a special force to her argument, and it was too easily accepted in the West. Mainly for this reason, a brief digression on the status of homosexuality de jure and de facto in late nineteenth-century Russia is appropriate here.

As was the case with other countries not influenced by the Napoleonic Code, Russian legislation regarded homosexuality, along with other “sexual” or “carnal” offenses, as a criminally punishable act. In reality, however, things were by no means so simple. Complications began with the very determination of corpus delicti. This was emphasized by the well-known jurist Vladimir Nabokov (father of the famous writer) in a 1902 article on carnal offenses in the new draft of the Criminal Code then in preparation. The sometimes insurmountable legal complexities in establishing the fact, substance and scope of the offense constituted for Nabokov one of the essential arguments in favor of the abolition of anti-homosexual legislation in general. Yet a major reason for repealing anti-homosexual laws in Russia at that time he sees in the shameful vice was indulged in by many well-known people in Petersburg: actors, writers, musicians, grand dukes. Their names were on everyone’s stronger in their positions, influence or connection. To point to all this is to speak of something long since known to all observers of our public life.

This passage not only reveals the gap between theory and practice, but also provides a key to understanding the principal “random and uneven” selectiveness of those criminally prosecuted: individuals “stronger in their positions, influence or connections” stood in little or no danger. A minimum of discretion was sufficient to avert even social embarrassment. In very rare instances, when a scandal might erupt due to some imprudence or other, the authorities would make every effort to suppress the matter and to prevent serious consequences.

There is not a single known legal proceeding on homosexual grounds from the entire century in which the principal was a figure of any real prominence—a member of the higher official ranks or the cultural elite, or someone well-established in fashionable society, to say nothing, of course, of anyone close to the throne. In extreme cases, when or if some outside factor, such as a particular antipathy on the part of the authorities, a provocative life-style or a loud scandal, came into play, anyone of importance accused of such a crime was subject to so-called "administrative measures" (e.g., confinement to one’s estate, or to a mental asylum or a monastery, transfer from the capital to the provinces, banishment abroad). These measures, however, were never a result of legal proceedings and should be distinguished from criminal prosecution, being merely arbitrary acts carried out by Imperial bureaucracy. In prerevolutionary Russia, as in the Soviet Union, “administrative measures” might often be applied when the authorities wished to avoid the publicity inevitably resulting from a legal action.

In nineteenth-century Russia, individuals widely known as homosexuals did hold numerous responsible government posts, playing major roles in the political and cultural life of the country. With regard to the period now being discussed, that is, the reign of Alexander III (1881–94), it is instructive to quote the opinion of one contemporary:
lips, and many flaunted their way of life. Countless were the scandals raised by public disclosure of such adventures, but the filthy affairs rarely went to trial.\textsuperscript{24}

Such a situation is not surprising when one learns that at the top of the “homosexual pyramid” in Tchaikovsky’s time stood the Grand Duke Sergei, son of Alexander II and brother of the reigning emperor.\textsuperscript{25} The Grand Duke’s penchant were widely known. They were openly discussed in the salons of the capital and were the subject of various jokes. Aleksandra Bogdanovitch, wife of the general Evgenii Bogdanovitch, in whose drawing room could be heard the latest news and gossip of all St. Petersburg, recorded in her diary:

Sergei Aleksandrovitch is living with his adjutant Martynov, and has suggested to his wife more than once that she choose a ‘husband’ from among her entourage. . . . One foreign newspaper has even written that \textit{Le Grand Duke Serge avec sa maîtresse Mme un tel has arrived in Paris. My word, what scandals!}\textsuperscript{31}

When the Grand Duke was appointed Governor-General of Moscow a vitriolic made the rounds in the capital: “Until now Moscow stood on seven hills, but now she must stand on one hillock” (a play on words: the Russian for “hillock,” bugor, puns with bugr, a distorted form of French bourgeoisie, cf. English bugger).\textsuperscript{32}

Our source for this irreverent pun is yet another diary, that of a distinguished court official, Count Vladimir Lamsdorff. Having first served as senior advisor to the foreign office, Lamsdorff went on to hold the office of Minister himself from 1900 until his death. “The Tsar calls Lamsdorff ‘madame’ and promotes his lover Savitskii within the ranks of the court,” muses privately Aleksei Suvorin, influential publisher and editor of the conservative newspaper \textit{Novoe vremia}.

Lamsdorff boasts that he spent thirty years in the corridors of the Foreign Ministry. As he is a homosexual and all men are for him sluts, he thus spent thirty years in . . . [a bordello].\textsuperscript{33}

According to Mrs. Orlova’s story, the fatal liaison purported to have caused Tchaikovsky’s destruction linked him to a certain Stenbock-Fermor family, and more precisely to an unspecified Count and his equally unspecified young nephew, neither of whom are ever otherwise identified.\textsuperscript{34} No one by that name is mentioned in any printed source relevant to Tchaikovsky’s life, though at least six families of the name (that is, of its two branches, the Stenbocks and the Stenbock-Fermors) were residing in St. Petersburg and its suburbs in the 1890s. The family was well represented at court, where some of its members occupied high positions.\textsuperscript{35} The only young man who might answer Mrs. Orlova’s description would have been Aleksandr Stenbock-Fermor, the son of Count Vladimir Stenbock-Fermor.\textsuperscript{36} In this case, the enraged uncle of Orlova’s story, who allegedly decided to risk a public scandal by denouncing the composer to the Tsar, could only have been Aleksei Stenbock-Fermor, Equerry at the court of Alexander III.\textsuperscript{37} This Aleksei was obviously an influential figure and could easily have handed his complaint to the Tsar personally, without having recourse to an intermediary. But his very status indicates that he was an experienced courtier, certainly well aware of the homosexual practices prevalent both within the Imperial family itself and amid the highest echelons of the bureaucratic establishment.

Another member of the clan was Hermann Stenbock, who was actually Superintendent of the Household of the Grand Duke Sergei.\textsuperscript{38} He was also first cousin to Vladimir Lamsdorff.\textsuperscript{39} Through Hermann and Aleksei alone, all the Stenbocks and Stenbock-Fermors alike would have been aware of the sexual predilections of the Grand Duke Sergei and his circle, and therefore sensible to how unpropitious this particular situation at court would be for any attempt at the homosexual exposure of someone of political, social, or cultural significance. In fact, the course of action attributed to them by Orlova would have been self-destructive. By creating an atmosphere of scandal around such a delicate issue they would have endangered the interests and prestige of their entire family.

But even in the unlikely event that Alexander III were to treat such a complaint seriously, no great calamity could have befallen the composer. As has already been suggested, the worst that might have happened would have been a private reprimand to prevent any further contact between him and the young man in question. The same effect, however, could be alto-

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gether more easily achieved without any appeal
to the Tsar, whatever, but merely by negoti-ating
with Tchaikovsky himself either directly or
through an intermediary. This would fully con-
form to accepted norms of behavior, and the
composer would undoubtedly have pledged to
leave the young Stenbock, whoever he may
have been, alone.

III
Mrs. Orlova would like to see in the School of
Jurisprudence a bastion of moral probity and in
its former students moral crusaders prepared to
commit a twofold crime of blackmail and mur-
der in order to save their alma mater’s reputa-
tion. In reality that educational establishment,
like any boarding school for boys of various
ages, was not characterized by particularly lofty
moral standards. Adolescent debauchery of
every sort flourished at the School.40 There has
even come down to us an obscene school hymn
called Pesni pravovedov (“Song of the students
of the School of Jurisprudence”), which cele-
brates the joys of homosexuality. It was pub-
lished in a limited edition of Russian pomo-
ographic poetry in 1879 with the commentary
that “this song was very much in vogue at the
School of Jurisprudence in the forties and
fifties.” A case of homosexual rape is recorded
in the reminiscences of Vladimir Tanev (elder
brother of the composer Sergei Tanev), who
was two years Tchaikovsky’s junior.42
Among those persons with links both to the
composer and the School, a number of homo-
sexuals stand out. Aside from Tchaikovsky’s
own brother Modest, there is, for instance, his
close acquaintance, the landowner and country
gentleman Nikolai Kondrat’ev, as well as sev-
eral other names mentioned occasionally in his
correspondence. Aleksei Apukhtin, later a re-
nowned poet, who interestingly enough had no
qualms at all with regard to his own sexual pre-
ference, was a classmate and close life-long
friend of the composer.43 Apukhtin led an
openly homosexual life, never fearful or embar-
rassed, and indeed often making fun of his own
conduct. None of the indignant law graduates
so anxious about the “honor of the uniform”
ever sought to persecute Apukhtin, in spite of
his often provocative behavior and vicious as-
pearions and a universal awareness of his erotic
habits. On the contrary, his friends included the
famed jurist Anatolii Koni, then serving as chief
prosecutor of the Department of Criminal Ap-
peal, and his own former classmate Vladimir
Gerard, who aided in the publication of a vol-
ume of the poet’s verse.44
Two circumstances relevant both to
Apukhtin and to Tchaikovsky helped to make
their positions unassailable: first, each be-
longed to the privileged class and shared with it
the proper standards of political outlook (both
were conservatives who supported the official
line) and, second, each was judicious in his con-
duct (however extravagant at times in
Apukhtin’s case), avoiding real excess and
knowing the right measure of discretion, tact,
and taste.
Not even this last was necessarily and always
true of another former student of the School,
Prince Vladimir Meshcherskii, two years
Tchaikovsky’s senior and for a long while quite
close to both him and his brother.45 Within the
context of our theme, his career deserves closer
examination. Meshcherskii, a personal friend of
Alexander III, who in 1872 became the pub-
lisher of the right-wing Government-sponsored
paper Gruzhdanin (“Citizen”), was probably the
most execrated public figure of this entire
period. A man of considerable power, a con-
fidant of the last two Russian Tsars, he exerted a
formidable influence on the workings of the
government. His pervasive homosexuality was
a secret to no one. The omniscient Mrs.
Bogdanovich, quoted above, writes in her diary
for 16 December 1891:

Talked . . . of Andrei Nikolaevich Murav’ev. E. V.
[the district’s husband] said that Murav’ev corrupted
Meshcherskii and Mosolov, who have in turn cor-
rupled half of Petersburg with their shameful pas-
sion.46
“Prince of Sodom and citizen of Gomorrah” is
what Meshcherskii was dubbed by the poet
and philosopher Vladimir Solov’yev.47 The
prince’s aggressive homosexuality had far-
reaching effects. The major statesman Sergei
Witte complained in his memoirs:

All his life Meshcherskii has only ever concerned
himself with his favorites: he makes of politics a
trade in which he deals in the most unscrupulous
manner to his own benefit and that of his favorites.
Thus I can only say of Meshcherskii that he is a thoroughly vile man. Almost everyone who has had dealings with him knows this.  

In 1887 Meshcherskii became involved in a potentially major scandal when he was caught with a trumpet-boy of the Guards infantry battalion.  

The affair had considerable consequences: his relatives disavowed him publicly and the Head Procurator of the Holy Synod (the highest religious authority), Konstantin Pobedonostsev, turning resolutely against him, spared no effort to have him disgraced. Yet Meshcherskii proceeded to defend himself, and Alexander III took his side. Not only was the scandal suppressed with no repercussions for the culprit, but, what is more, “at the height of his scandals Meshchersky . . . also reached the height of his power, for at this very moment he became a trusted counsellor to the Tsar.”

In 1889 the notorious prince was again in homosexual trouble, finding himself implicated in an affair involving some two hundred other persons, members of the Guards and actors from the Aleksandrinskii Theater. It was rumored that he might be ordered to leave St. Petersburg for a time. In the end, however, nothing of the sort occurred, and this predicament was safely weathered as well. As for yet another attempt on the part of Meshcherskii’s enemies to destroy him, by turning over to the next sovereign, Nicholas II, the prince’s correspondence with his lover Burdakov, Suvorin comments: “The Tsar read the correspondence. He regards this ‘association’ with indifference.”

If no harm could come to such School of Jurisprudence alumni who were universally detested, then certainly there was nothing to be feared by such renowned and personable figures as Apukhtin, not to mention Tchaikovsky, who seems to have aroused affection in all who knew him.

The central proposition in Orlova’s analysis of the “conspirators” is that for Tchaikovsky’s fellow students “the honor of the uniform was sacred.” We have already seen how dubious this assumption is: no attempt was made, for instance, to subject either Apukhtin or Meshcherskii to a “court of honor.” And indeed, the presumed logic of these “conspirators” is rather less than plausible, for the actions ascribed to them, being in fact the blackmail and collective murder of a highly celebrated figure, would have sullied the “uniform” far more than any sort of sexual proclivity. These were refined juridical and diplomatic minds, fully aware of the law and of legal implications. The reported instigator of the “court of honor,” Nikolai Jacobi, in 1893 served in the Senate’s Criminal Court of Appeals. Even if one of the Stenbock-Hermers had approached him with such a complaint, it would have been well within his competence to make the presumptuous aristocrat see reason and to silence the whole affair.

In any event, no one would by this time have identified Tchaikovsky with either the School of Jurisprudence or the uniform worn by its students. He was first and foremost a famous composer, least of all a former graduate of the School. As for Tchaikovsky himself, he felt no attachment toward the school that had caused him so much misery during his early adolescence. He maintained ties with only a very few of his former classmates and disliked the rest. He visited the School on some few official occasions or in connection with his nephews, yet seldom did he recall such visits with anything but distaste.

Finally, Tchaikovsky himself had strong and powerful connections, starting with the emperor Alexander III. It is worth noting that in 1888 the Tsar, in a characteristic gesture of benevolence, granted the composer a lifetime pension. Elsewhere within the Imperial family, in addition to being personally acquainted with Grand Duke Sergei, Tchaikovsky also maintained cordial and even artistic relations with the Grand Duke Konstantin, himself a dilettante composer who also wrote poetry under the pseudonym K. R. In a letter to Nadezhda von Meck of 10 November 1886 we read: “Among higher circles, besides the Emperor and Empress, who treat me with favor, I have a particular patron, namely the Grand Duke Konstantin Konstantinovich.” The last letters Tchaikovsky wrote to the Grand Duke are dated 21 and 26 September 1893—about a month before his death. They make clear the sympathy, respect, and admiration which the Grand Duke had for the composer, whom he was perfectly happy to allow to treat him as an equal.

As for Grand Duke Sergei, it is not unlikely that the “information network” spontaneously
operating within homosexual circles of any period, without regard to social boundaries, could have apprised him of the composer’s homosexuality. In the early 1890s the Grand Duke stood particularly close to the throne [Meshcherskii’s influence, by the way, was also ascendant], and he would not have hesitated to intervene, if need be, on behalf of a celebrated acquaintance and fellow homosexual.48 As Mrs. Bogdanovich notes in her diary about the 1889 affair mentioned above: “It is said that the Grand Dukes will rush to conceal this case: many of them belong to this [homosexual] company.”49

IV

One recurrent feature of Mrs. Orlova’s attempt to reconstruct events is her not infrequent confusion with regard to dates, along with certain discrepancies in dating between her Russian and English versions. The climax of her story, Tchaikovsky’s dramatic visit to Tsarskoe Selo, where he was allegedly “sentenced” by the “court of honor,” takes place on Wednesday, 20 October/1 November, according to her piece in Novyi amerikansets, but on Tuesday, 19/31 October, according to her article that appeared in Music and Letters.50 Yet on the evening of the latter day the composer attended a performance of Rubinstein’s opera The Maccabees at the home of Kononov, in the company of a fair number of people in a very close space.51

On the morning of the next day, Wednesday, Orlova claims that Tchaikovsky received the poison from a good acquaintance of his, the lawyer August Gerke, even though Gerke was bringing him the draft of a brand-new agreement with the publisher Bessel.52 Later that day, he took a stroll with one of his nephews, Aleksandr Litke, sharing with him various humorous recollections of his late eccentric friend Nikolai Bochechkarov. Afterward he dined with Vera Butakova, who had been in love with him in her youth. That same evening he attended a production of Aleksandr Ostrovskii’s play The Passionate Heart.53 We learn from the reminiscences of Iurii Iur’ev that he met Tchaikovsky “with his entire ‘suite’ of relatives and friends” at a performance in 1893 of this very play. According to Iur’ev, the composer was in excellent spirits.54 This episode almost certainly occurred on the eve of Tchaikovsky’s illness now under review.55 During the play’s intermission the composer visited the leading actor Konstantin Varlamov in his dressing room where they chatted amiably, ridiculing the doctrine of spiritualism.56

Are we to hold with Orlova’s belief that the composer’s conduct on this as well as similar occasions was nothing but a display of nervous bravado? Surely not. Nor does the idea that Modest might simply have invented the Varlamov episode hold water: his account was published while the actor was still living, and he would not have risked the latter’s refutation. Tchaikovsky ended this day with a supper at Leiner’s restaurant. His nephews were present with some of their friends, as were Iurii Gorbunov, Aleksandr Glazunov, and Fedor Mülbach.57

We know that the composer yielded to pressure from Modest and changed his immediate plans. Instead of returning to Moscow the following day as arranged, he decided to prolong his stay in the capital in order to attend the premiere of his brother’s new play at the end of the month.58 That following day, 21 October/2 November, when his illness had already started (or when, according to Orlova, he would already have begun taking the poison), Tchaikovsky nevertheless continued his business routine. He left to call on the family of Eduard Nápravnik, but halfway there felt indisposed and returned home, sending the Nápravnik’s a note implying that the visit was only to be postponed briefly.59 Despite his indisposition, he took the time to write several letters, one of which, addressed to Ivan Grekov, manager of the Odessa Opera Theatre, has been preserved. In it he writes of his various projects and firmly asserts his intention to come to Odessa for a week between mid-December and January, in fact, he asks Grekov to find him appropriate accommodations.60 Next, the composer met again with Mülbach, who manufactured instruments, to discuss business.61 And lastly, he received a visit at five o’clock from Aleksandr Glazunov, whom he had invited earlier, an invitation certainly confirmed the night before.62

V

Now let us turn to the purely medical aspect of this matter—the poison vs. cholera dilemma—and Mrs. Orlova’s interpretation of it.
The purpose of this discussion will be twofold: on the one hand, to explore certain contradictions in logic and, on the other, to point out the various inaccuracies, misrepresentations, and manipulations of facts.

Our first unresolvable contradiction arises with respect to the poison allegedly supplied to Tchaikovsky. Just what type of poison could this have been? Among Orlowa’s supporters there is disagreement on this point, while she herself makes no comment.29 All, however, fail to consider the fact that poison in general is a fast-acting agent, as anyone who reads murder mysteries knows. Tchaikovsky’s illness lasted some time—four full days. There are of course exceptions: rare, exotic, slow-acting poisons extracted from the glands of African snakes or Indian spiders and used to ill purpose in the times of the Borgias and the Medicis. But it is difficult to imagine, without entering into the realm of adventure fiction, that the “old boy conspirators” might have had access to such a drug.

Malcolm Brown took this matter up with a specialist in toxicology. According to the latter, the supposed poison would have to have been of an unusually rare sort in order to elicit the effects observed in the ailing Tchaikovsky. A four days’ illness would have been impossible in the case of acute poisoning by arsenic or any of the then more or less accessible toxicants. The alternative possibility, that the poison might have been taken in small doses, thus prolonging the dying process for several days, must also be ruled out. As Brown puts it:

Could it have actually been the case that the resolute Tchaikovsky continued to quaff that noxious brew under the solicitous gaze of his brother and four physicians? Can the distraught composer have succeeded in persuading four doctors to stand by and to watch their patient die slowly and horribly from poisoning over a four day period, all the while issuing regular but falsified medical bulletins, and, in the end, placing their professional reputations in jeopardy by signing their names to a fraudulent death certificate?26

And so, given the terms of Orlowa’s thesis, one is left with a choice: either the doctors and Modest were not only accomplices in a cover-up of Tchaikovsky’s death, but also direct accomplices in his actual murder—a proposition clearly untenable; or else, in the midst of the colorless “old boy conspirators” there was in fact some sinister figure unknown to us, a match for Moriarty or Fu-Manchu, who somehow contrived within the conventional conditions of St. Petersburg to procure a deadly drug of Asiatic or African origin. We leave the resolution of this dilemma to the speculative reader.

VI

Orlowa’s views on cholera and its prevention and cure demand more detailed treatment. By the end of 1893 the nations of Europe had amassed a quite considerable fund of knowledge in their battle with Asiatic cholera since its first appearance on the continent at the beginning of the century.77 In particular, it had been established that the disease spread basically through the ingestion of contaminated water, and that there was little likelihood of contracting it through simple contact with the sick person, provided, of course, that elementary hygienic precautions were observed. A relevant article from the authoritative encyclopedia of the period states:

Given an acquaintance with the means of cholera infection and the possibility of carrying out the hygienic and dietetic prescriptions ensuing, hence, one can almost certainly avoid contracting cholera [italics mine]. Hygienic and dietetic measures amount to an avoidance of anything that might carry the cholera germs into the digestive tract and anything that might increase one’s individual predisposition to the contraction of cholera.78

The question of the quarantine of victims of the disease was discussed at a meeting of the Twelfth [Extraordinary] Provincial Congress of Physicians of the Moscow District Council in March 1893, seven months before the composer’s death. The physicians came to the conclusion that “quarantine of persons ill with cholera need not be a compulsory measure for the population.”79 Furthermore, nursing of cholera victims by members of the family was actively encouraged.80 As with many other infectious diseases, the dynamics of the spread of cholera is unpredictable. Experience had already shown that epidemics might erupt to claim numerous victims even under the best sanitary conditions, or might just as easily run a quite moderate course despite a lack of even the most basic notions of sanitation.81 There is no
reason to suspect that Tchaikovsky would have been any exception.

It is true that by the early 1890s cholera was no longer such a fatal illness as is commonly believed. With prompt and accurate diagnosis and timely treatment, patients could and did recover (the composer Borodin in 1885, for example). During this particular stage of this epidemic, in October 1893, nearly half of all those who had contracted the disease managed to survive. The fatal factor in Tchaikovsky’s case was precisely that the diagnosis was not made promptly and treatment did not begin in time.

To remedy accumulated inaccuracies and misperceptions, I offer here a detailed reconstruction of the last days of Tchaikovsky’s life. Orlova observes correctly that discrepancies exist between the accounts of the fatal illness by Tchaikovsky’s brother and by his physician. Nowhere, however, do we find sufficient evidence to accept her dramatic proposition that these are the result of collusion between the two to suppress the “truth.” Possible alternative and more innocuous explanations must at least be considered. From the very outset it is important to emphasize a methodological principle analogous to the juridical concept of “presumption of innocence.” The burden of argument lies with the prosecution, even when those accused of conspiracy and fraud are long since deceased.

The four doctors who treated Tchaikovsky, the Bertenson brothers, Vasilii and Lev, and the latter’s assistants, Aleksandr Zander and Nikolai Mamonov, all enjoyed flawless reputations. The Bertensons were especially prominent; the elder brother, Lev, was in fact court physician to Alexander III, and his practice included “the entire artistic world of the capital.” Lev Bertenson was extremely sensitive to anything that might affect his medical prestige. The behavior attributed to him by Orlova would have run counter both to his own interests and to common sense. It is highly unlikely that someone of his social and professional stature might allow himself to be drawn into such a dubious and even criminal venture, one involving blackmail, sexual scandal, and virtual murder. The risk would have been much too great, far outweighing any sympathy, however deep, that he might have felt for the composer or for Modest.

From a medical standpoint, the period during which the composer could have been infected with cholera is limited to three days. The first alarming symptoms appeared in the early hours of Thursday, 21 October/2 November, making the morning of the previous Monday the terminus ante quem and midday Wednesday the terminus post quem for the moment of infection. Given this, the actual circumstances of his receiving the cholera vibrio became irrelevant, particularly as they cannot be determined. It could have happened any time within these three days. The medical considerations relating to this incubation period suggest that the notorious glass of unboiled water which Tchaikovsky allegedly drank either Wednesday night at Leiner’s restaurant or at home the next morning could not have been responsible for his infection.

One is struck in Modest’s account of the illness by a persistent note of apology. As will be seen, the tragic outcome occurred because the nature of the illness was not established early enough, and Modest obviously suffered intense remorse for having failed to save his brother’s life. This feeling of guilt and his conscious or unconscious attempts at self-justification permeate his text; such complex sentiments account for the evasions, omissions, and even distortions characterizing his narrative and also are the cause, in part, of those contradictions with Bertenson’s version seen by Orlova as proof of a conspiratorial cover-up. Exposure of Modest’s behavior is a delicate matter. After all, the failure to recognize such fateful symptoms in time does not constitute objective guilt, though this fact alone will mean little to someone prone to self-reproach. That there was no reason to suspect anything wrong at the start is the underlying theme of Modest’s memoir, as seen, for example, in his reaction to the first signs of his brother’s illness: “This did not particularly disturb me, because he often had such disorders.”

But Modest had greater reasons to feel guilty, reasons not articulated in his narrative. On Thursday, for instance, the crucial day—when tragedy might still have been averted, had the cholera been diagnosed sooner—Modest both before and after lunch was busy with his “own affairs.” He does not specify what affairs these had been, which is no great wonder, for up until Thursday night Modest was entirely absorbed
in preparations for the premiere of his play Prejudices, scheduled to take place on Tuesday, 26 October/6 November.22

Twice on Thursday morning, Modest says, he proposed sending for a doctor, but both times received “firm” refusals.83 During his absence, the condition of the patient worsened sharply, yet no competent or responsible person was with him. Alina Bruilova recalls: “As usual in a bachelor’s apartment, everyone had dispersed and no one was at home except a servant who began to employ all the home remedies known to him.”84 Modest returned around five o’clock and, upon witnessing the deterioration, and despite renewed protests, proceeded to send for his brother’s “favorite doctor,” Vasili Bertenson, who, as it later turned out, was not at home. Modest, meanwhile, chose not to stay, but left again about six, after placing a hot compress on the composer’s stomach. Between six and eight, Modest’s servant Nazar, not waiting for Dr. Bertenson, “sent for the first doctor he could find”—though apparently there was still no suspicion of cholera.85

According to Modest’s account, Vasili Bertenson did not arrive until 8:15 p.m. Here was another crucial point in the history of Tchaikovsky’s treatment. We read that “the doctor could not at first establish that it was cholera, but he was convinced at once of the extreme seriousness and severity of the illness.”86 Whatever his hesitations, Vasili Bertenson, after prescribing “all that was necessary... immediately judged it essential to call in his brother, Lev Bertenson,”87 the famous court physician.

It was after ten when Lev Bertenson finally arrived. He at last made the correct diagnosis—cholera, and in its final stages.88 Nearly twenty-four hours had elapsed from the appearance of the first symptoms until the establishment of the diagnosis. This circumstance alone was sufficient to have led to the fatal result, the disease having been caught too late.89 Be that as it may, the diagnosis established at day’s end offered little hope. Lev Bertenson later stated frankly in Novoe vremia:

I found the disease in the so-called algid phase of the illness. The symptoms were thoroughly characteristic, and I could not but recognize immediately a very serious case of cholera.90

Most of the medical evidence cited by Orlova bears little direct relation to the matter at hand. Her only impressive argument stems from contradictions between the various documents—the bulletins on the progress of the illness, posted 24 October/5 November on the doors of the apartment where the composer lay dying, and the two accounts published in Novoe vremia, the one by Lev Bertenson [27 October/8 November] and the other by Modest [1/13 November].91 One discrepancy of some importance, however, Orlova does not emphasize: according to Bertenson, Tchaikovsky was given a bath intended to alleviate his condition on Saturday, while according to Modest this was on Sunday.

Orlova’s conclusion: both were trying to cover up the fact of a suicide, clumsily disguising it as cholera.92 Not only does she overlook the fact that Modest would already have had Bertenson’s version from Novoe vremia in front of him when he sat down to write his own account, but she also fails to note that by this time two additional eyewitness accounts of Tchaikovsky’s last days had been published as well. These interviews appeared in Novosti i bizhevata gazeta on 26 October/7 November, the day before Bertenson’s account in Novoe vremia, and were given by Dr. Mamontov, whose description of the course of events corresponds in its essentials with that of Bertenson, and by the singer Nikolai Figner, who was present during the dying composer’s final hours.93 Had a cover-up actually taken place, it is inconceivable that Modest in writing his version would not have consulted these previously published accounts.94

With respect to the discrepancies between Bertenson’s and Modest’s version, Orlova also fails to recognize one circumstance of paramount importance. Bertenson’s narrative was, in fact, not strictly a written account, but a communication made to the paper as an interview—that is, orally. The article in question begins:

Contradictions in the evidence appearing in print concerning the illness of the late P. I. Tchaikovsky have compelled us to turn to Dr. L. B. Bertenson, who directed the treatment of the late composer. At our urgent request Dr. Bertenson told us the following...
—after which the interview proceeds in the form of direct discourse.106 Bertensh himself mentions his meeting with the Novoe vremia reporter in a note the following day.107 It is not likely that during his oral delivery the doctor was consulting his medical records so as to pinpoint the precise details of events which his memory had preserved in basic outline. Moreover, the doctor had attended his patient only once or at best twice a day, and even then for short periods, relying heavily on his assistants. Errors, even one so significant as the omission of a day, might easily result under such circumstances, whether through Bertensh’s own imprecision or through inaccuracies in the journalist’s notes.

Orlova rightly points out that a whole day is “lost” in Bertensh’s narrative.107 Yet apart from this, Bertensh’s interview and Modest’s account, as well as the interview with Dr. Mamonov, do agree in all essential matters. Might not additional reasons be hypothesized for the physician’s “loss” of a day, without having to resort to the “conspiracy” theory?

In my opinion, the reason may well be traceable to the bath that Bertensh belatedly prescribed for the composer.108 At this period the bath treatment was the usual prescription in cases where the kidneys were thought to be affected. But Tchaikovsky himself, as well as his brothers, was extremely superstitious in regard to their mother who had also died of cholera— at the very moment of her immersion in a bath. Under these circumstances, any physician might have hesitated some time before prescribing this treatment, fearing that the subsequent nervous distress might neutralize any potentially beneficial effects of the bath. The bath was finally given on Sunday, 24 October, when the composer was already close to coma, but with no results. It is unlikely that at this stage of the illness a bath would have helped in any case. Still, this does not rule out the possibility that Bertensh, deeply upset by the failure of his efforts, may have attributed some significance to the belated time the bath was given.109 Might this have caused him sufficient self-doubt to affect the accuracy of this detail in his recollections, consciously or not? Bertensh implies that Tchaikovsky’s brothers, Nikolai and Modest, ought to bear the principal blame: because of the circumstances of their mother’s death, there was in the composer “and in his relatives a superstitious fear of the bath.”110 The sentimental resistance of the Tchaikovsky brothers seems to have been, at the very least, an important factor in Bertensh’s decision to postpone administering the bath. The composer’s own feelings in this matter would naturally have to be ignored by his physician, yet he could hardly ignore the pressure from the patient’s family. A somewhat complex psychological situation seems to have taken shape here, involving the passions and interests both of Tchaikovsky’s relatives and of his doctors.

This predicament undoubtedly had some impact on the confusion between the accounts. It is evident that the only salient point resulting from Bertensh’s “loss” of a day is that the reader of his interview cannot tell that the bath was given to the composer not on Saturday, as it might appear, but later, on Sunday— while the question of whether or not the physician himself was responsible for the delay is sidestepped altogether.111

Orlova is misguided when she makes the major point of her argument, asserting that throughout both the illness and the period up until the funeral Tchaikovsky’s doctors and relatives failed to observe the precautionary measures against cholera, thus betraying the foul play in which they were involved.112 She emphasizes especially that a “government decree” strongly discouraged crowded funerals and funeral banquets for victims of cholera— both of which took place in Tchaikovsky’s case, of course.113 The document that she cites, however, was in no way a mandatory official commandment. This text, dating from 2/14 July 1892 and entitled Directions Concerning Measures of Personal Protection Against Cholera, was merely an exhortation aimed primarily at the poor and ill-informed segments of the population, those predisposed to panic, in order to prevent mass flights from residential areas and to combat nonobservance of elementary rules of hygiene.114

But there did exist another document, an actual government decree, or, more precisely, juridical act, of which Mrs. Orlova appears to be unaware. In the summer of 1892, the Russian government created special executive sanitary
commissions for the struggle against cholera. These commissions were endowed with administrative powers “both in regard to the prevention of the transmission and spread of [the disease], and in regard to measures for putting a halt to an epidemic already developed.”115 Detailed Regulations Concerning the Executive Sanitary Commissions were proposed by the Medical Council, ratified by the Minister of Internal Affairs, and published in two versions in June 1892 and March 1893.116 Obviously the Regulations, being the legal statute, possessed far greater authority than the Directions. The 1892 Regulations still contain a passage similar in phrasing to that cited by Orlova from the Directions about sealing the coffin and avoiding crowded funerals and funeral banquets.117 In the Regulations of 1893, however, these same instructions are no longer to be found.118 This is crucial, for the removal of this entire paragraph from the 1892 Regulations can only indicate that the Russian government’s Medical Council had become aware of the latest developments in the field of cholera epidemiology, particularly in the wake of two special medical congresses devoted to this problem.119

Of the three documents discussed, then, only the 1893 Regulations can bear any relation to the circumstances of Tchaikovsky’s death and events following it. In the text of this document nothing is found to cause any suspicion that his relatives and physicians failed to execute official instructions.

It is worth noting, too, the total absence in the press of any accusations of what Mrs. Orlova calls “a disregard of the most basic and obligatory sanitary precautions,”120 as well as the apparent satisfaction of the aforementioned executive sanitary commissions with the preventive measures that were taken. Given Tchaikovsky’s celebrity, his death from cholera was an event of national significance. The course of his illness was followed closely, and it is inconceivable that dozens of journalists could have failed to sense something going on behind the scenes or that they might have connived with official medical authorities to ignore alleged violations of the preventive regulations.

In support of her claim that preventive measures were disregarded, Orlova cites only one piece of evidence. She quotes the following passage from The Chronicle of My Musical Life of Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov, who attended the first of the two requiems held the very first day:

How odd that though death was the result of cholera, there was free access to the requiems. I remember that Verzhbilovich [here she makes an omission in the text] kissed the body on the face and head.121

Prejudice and fear with regard to any infectious illness are understandable and common. Rimsky-Korsakov’s perplexity bespeaks merely his own ignorance of the new medical data about cholera’s epidemiology. For all we know, Aleksandr Verzhbilovich, cellist and professor at the St. Petersburg Conservatory, may have shared this same prejudice, but we can hardly call him a witness on this occasion. Orlova omits Rimsky-Korsakov’s remark that Verzhbilovich was “totally drunk after some sort of binge.”122 Also completely unfounded are Orlova’s assertions that “the coffin was sealed on the final day” 123 and that “information alleging that [precautionary measures against the spread of infection] were taken are found only in reminiscences written many years after the event, at best at a second hand.” Even amid the multiple miseries of the epidemic, Tchaikovsky’s nationwide fame was sufficient reason for many St. Petersburg papers to run daily reports on what was happening in Modest’s apartment. These brief reports allow us to reconstruct the days prior to the funeral.

On the morning of Monday, 25 October/6 November [the day of the composer’s death], Modest’s apartment was disinfected by the sanitary commission. Tchaikovsky’s body lay at first in a small room on the sofa where he had passed away. At this point he was photographed, and his death mask was taken.125 By the time of the first requiem (2:00 p.m.), the composer’s body, now dressed in a black suit, had been transferred to a corner reception room and placed upon a low catafalque.126 After the second requiem, which began at 7:00 p.m. and ended around 9:00 p.m., “the body of Piotr Il’ich was placed in a metal coffin in the presence of the relatives and some close friends, such as A. A. Nasvetevich, N. N. Figner and others.”127 We
are told that “all preventive measures were taken: the body was wrapped in a sheet soaked in sublimate solution, the inner coffin made of metal was soldered, the outer made of oak was screwed shut.” This final act is reported to have taken place with the police present, according to routine practice in cholera cases. Nikolai Kashkin, a friend and colleague of Tchaikovsky from the Moscow Conservatory, "found the coffin already closed and sealed" when he arrived in St. Petersburg the next day in time for the evening requiem. There can thus be no doubt that the coffin was sealed within the first twenty-four hours and lay in state until the day of the funeral on 28 October/9 November.

VII

Here it is appropriate to note that the newspaper campaign which followed Tchaikovsky's death focused not so much on the various rumors about the manner of his death, but rather on his alleged mistreatment by his physicians. Neither the extensive newspaper coverage of his illness, itself seen by Orlova as unprecedented and therefore suspicious, nor the accompanying speculations, should very much surprise us. An event such as this was virtually unheard of: a highly celebrated figure had succumbed to an illness which, however terrifying, rarely struck the upper strata of society. This would have been sufficiently sensational to generate the bewilderment and the conjectures, not all of them innocuous, which we find in the media in the very first days following the event, even before Mamonov, Figner, Bertenson, and Modest had come out with their accounts. Apparently, Bertenson was annoyed that some rumors referred directly to him, and, not satisfied with the interview published in Novoe vremia, he released a special statement, printed in the next issue of the paper. Here, in particular, he writes:

Certain papers have, in connection with the illness of P. I. Tchaikovsky, ascribed to me opinions and comments in such distorted form that I am compelled to deny them, especially as I have seen no members of the press except the reporter from Novoe vremia, and therefore could not have spoken with any of them.

Early speculation as to the manner of the composer's death or the nature of his disease gradually gave way to public discussion of his medical treatment. As the initial shock subsided, the pertinent questions began to be asked. As one contemporary cautiously phrased it, “the weight of the loss was increased by a recognition of its chance nature and the certainty that it might easily have been averted.” Alina Briulova elaborates on this:

As always with such a virtually unexpected death, no one can believe it, and so everyone starts inventing various fictions and goes straight off in search of those responsible. And in this case all the thunder of the Petersburg salons crashed down around Bertenson.

The major instigator of this anti-Bertenson campaign was Aleksei Suvorin, the influential publisher of Novoe vremia. In Berlin at the time, and having learned of Tchaikovsky's death from the papers, he indicated his prejudice against the Bertensons in his diary, singling out the affair of the bath and suggesting that the two physicians did not deserve their high reputations. Bertenson's impromptu interview did not help matters much, being, as we have seen, rather sketchy and muddled, and failing even to provide actual dates. Modest was forced to step forward in order to clear up the mounting confusion. Perhaps he felt it expedient to support Bertenson, while at the same time easing his own conscience, as suggested earlier. He intended his now famous account to be definitive, so as to “dispel all conflicting rumors.” Its publication on 1/13 November seems to have put an end to any skepticism concerning the cholera diagnosis, but the abundance of medical data now made available by the two accounts only intensified the controversy over the treatment. On 3/15 November, nine days after the composer's death, Suvorin, having returned to St. Petersburg, launched a vicious attack in his paper on Lev Bertenson and his colleagues. The campaign grew, other papers joined in. On 5/17 November Novoe vremia even demanded that “Dr. Bertenson ought to present to one of the scientific societies... a detailed report on his treatment of P. I. Tchaikovsky” so that an objective and public examination of his competence might be possible.

But among all the many accusations against the Bertensons of blunders "regrettable for their
professional prestige," never was the slightest allusion made to the possibility of the composer's having committed suicide. The defamation campaign prompted Modest to write yet another letter to Novoe vremia on behalf of the Tchaikovsky family (printed 7/19 November), in which he declared "any reproaches whatsoever directed toward the treatment of Piotr Il'ich's fatal illness to be absolutely unjust." This made an impression, and most of the papers backed down, but it was not until some years later that Suvorin apologized to Bertenson publicly.  

The review of this controversy enables us to combat Orlova's final point, providing a reasonable explanation for the lengthy and unpublished letter from Bertenson to Modest, which she claims to have seen in the Klin archives in 1938. In this letter, according to her, the course of the composer's illness is described in detail, which caused her to wonder: "might not this letter represent instructions on how Tchaikovsky's illness should be discussed with outsiders and in the press?" No doubt, but this need have nothing to do with any conspiracy. Given Modest's involvement in the controversy over Tchaikovsky's medical treatment, appropriate coordination between him and the physicians became a matter of expediency. The letter Mrs. Orlova professes to have seen almost certainly provided guidelines for their mutual stand against the newspaper detractors.  

VIII  

In the end, however, this great elaborate blend of rumor, testimony, and documentation, aggravated by the initial impact on the public of the unexpectedness of Tchaikovsky's death, and further combined with the confusion in Bertenson's interview, the misjudgments in the composer's treatment, the polemic in the press concerning the competency of his doctors, the defense of those doctors by the composer's relatives, and, last but not least, Tchaikovsky's homosexuality, which surrounded him, as it were, with that aura of mystery and things left unsaid—all this could not but create favorable ground for fantastic conjectures about his suicide.  

In nineteenth-century Russia, as now, homosexuality often evoked certain medical and criminal associations. Regarded as unsurprising in the case of an ordinary individual, such associations posed a problem in the public mind when linked to someone whom well-deserved and worldwide fame had raised so high above the crowd. The public had to resolve this paradox, and to resolve it, moreover, in accordance with a psychological need not to denigrate, but on the contrary to elevate the composer in the eyes of his audience, to enhance his share of national sympathy and universal affection. The sole solution was an unfounded premise that he had suffered a constant, agonizing, and tragic crisis on account of his unorthodox—and thereby compromising—sexual tendencies. The man of genius, proven an unwilling pawn of forbidden passions, is found worthy then of sympathy and compassion, not condemnation. He acquires a romantic halo, and through this, with its implied tragic catharsis, the conflict is resolved. And what could be more tragic and more cathartic in such circumstances than suicide?  

And so, regardless of actual events, the mechanism of mass psychology was already predisposed in Tchaikovsky's case to follow archetypal mythological patterns, which were needed to relieve the emotional tensions surrounding his personality and behavior. Myth acted here in its natural role of mediator, in accordance with the formula of Lévi-Strauss. Especially could this seem true of Tchaikovsky who was never an artist of an elite for whose fate the population at large may have had little concern. Rather he was, like no one else, very much a national composer, enjoying immense popularity in Russia both in his lifetime and long afterward.  

One additional circumstance did exist which can only have contributed to the talk. On 16/28 October 1893, just eight days before the composer's death, his Sixth Symphony was performed for the first time. According to the testimony of various memoirs, the reaction of the audience was mixed and somewhat perplexed. The circumstances of Tchaikovsky's illness, however, confusing and controversial as they had been, could but drastically alter subsequent public response to it. At the memorial concert of 6/18 November under the direction of Eduard Nápravník, this same symphony created a tremendous sensation. "It is indeed a sort of swan song, a presentiment of impending death, and
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hence comes its tragic impression,” wrote
Russkaia muzykal’naia gazeta.148 The public
heard in this music not only a requiem that the
composer had sung for himself, not only a
prophecy of his own imminent end, but also a
tragic decision. born of inconsolable despair, to
take his own life. And inasmuch as the
“Pathétique” had been dedicated to his nephew
Bob Davydov, certain inevitable conclusions
could arise in their own accord.

Tchaikovsky, of course, like any great artist,
showed a sense of the tragic. But some element
of the tragic is present in the very nature of art,
in the mortality and uncertainty of man’s

crlytho lot, in the clash of good and evil, in the
relations of man and artist to God, the world, so-
ciety, and his mortal self. Yet to project aspects
of creative work onto biography, as has been
done, for example, with respect to Tchaikov-
sky’s last symphony, with the conclusion that
it reflects suicidal intentions on the part of its
author, is at best a questionable venture in any
of the arts and especially in music. It is to in-
trude unwarrantedly upon the mystery that al-
 lows art to free itself from the creator’s control
and to gain an independent and
perhaps undying significance.

Translated by Ralph C. Burr, Jr.

NOTES


***Orolva’s first lengthy article on the subject was published in Russian in 1980 in the New York émigré weekly Novyi amerikanets, appearing in two parts: “Taina zhizni Chaiikovskogo,” Novyi amerikanets, 5–11 November 1980, pp. 20–21; “Taina smerti Chaiikovskogo,” ibid., 12–18 No-

dember 1980, pp. 22–23. A scholarly version in English, en-
titled “Tchaikovsky: The Last Chapter,” appeared in Music o/ Letters 63 (1981), 125–45 (hereafter cited as “Last Chap-
ter”). The English musicologist David Brown found her ar-
guments impressive enough to write in his entry on

Tchaikovsky in The New Grove Dictionary of Music and

Musicians: “that he [Tchaikovsky] committed suicide cannot

do be doubted” (pt. with additions in The New Grove Rus-
sian Masters 1 [New York, 1986], pp. 223–26). The Orolva

theory was also accepted, if more cautiously, by other scholars: see entries on Tchaikovsky in The New Oxford Companion to Music (1983) and in The Concise Oxford Dic-


*Orolva’s ideas were first outlined by Joel Spiegelman in

“The Trial, Condemnation, and Death of Tchaikovsky,” High Fidelity 31, no. 2 (1981), 49–51, even before her major

English publication in Music o/ Letters. A response to his

article was made by three eminent Slavists, Nina Beckerova,

Malcolm H. Brown, and Simon Karlinsky, in “Tchai-

kovsky’s Suicide Reconsidered: A Rebuttal,” ibid., 31, no. 8

(1981), 49, 85 (hereafter cited as “Rebuttal”). Orolva at-

tempted to argue with the authors of “Rebuttal” in another

Russian article, “Khlopya ili samoubiastro” appearing in

Novyi amerikanets, 19–25 July 1981, pp. 38–42. Then, on

26 July, the New York Times published a piece by Donal

Henahan exposing Mrs. Orolva’s theory—“2d Tchai-

kovsky Really Committed Suicide?”—which in turn was fol-

lowed by a letter from the authors of “Rebuttal,” which Hen-

ahan’s final comments (9 Aug.). The first objections in Rus-

sian were made by Konstantin Arenskii in the émigré

newspaper Novoe russkoe slovo, 19 Dec. 1980, the same pa-

per printed a response by Orolva [13 Jan. 1981] and an an-


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These rumors are flatly denied as groundless by the composer’s physician Vasili Bertelsen in his memoirs, Zau tridi sob’let: Lis’ski iz vzuscheninin (St. Petersburg, 1914), p. 79, by Anastoli Tchaikovsky’s wife Praskov’ya in her “Recollections of Tchaikovsky,” Music of Letters 21 (1940), 109; and by his nephew Iurii Davydov both in his Zapiski o P. I. Chaitovskom [Moscow, 1963] and, especially, in his “Poslednie dni zhizni P. I. Chaitovskogo,” in VG, pp. 333–36. One cannot accept without further substantiation Mrs. Orlova’s claims that Iurii Davydov and Vasili Bertelsen in their old age contested orally, in contradiction to their own published statements, the truth about Tchaikovsky’s death to some few individuals, usually unspecified or long since dead (“Last Chapter,” p. 131, also 134, n. 28, Novoe russkoe slovo, 13 Jan. 1981). In each case Orlova received such information at second or third hand. As for Y. Zander, son of Lev Bertelsen’s assistant during Tchaikovsky’s illness, it is not even clear why Mrs. Orlova numbers him among the sources for her particular story. About him we learn only that “what Zander heard from his father provides in many details of the composer’s last days” (“Last Chapter,” p. 131). What these details were and whether they are pertinent to the “suicide theory” is again not specified.

Nicolai Slonimsky attempted to refute “dark rumors” about Tchaikovsky’s death as early as 1938. His reasonable explanation for why these rumors were never put to rest places the blame on Modest, who deliberately suppressed or misinterpreted so many facts of his brother’s life, particularly by “concealing so crudely the all-explaining factor of Tchaikovsky’s emotional aberration that the reader is fully justified in suspecting the objective truth of this biography” in Slonimsky, “Further Light on Tchaikovsky,” Musical Quarterly 24 (1938), 39. During a 1962 visit to the Soviet Union, Slonimsky would hear various versions of these stories “right out of Gothic horror tales,” some of which even had Tzar Alexander III himself taking part in the Tchaikovsky affair, presenting the unfortunate composer with the ultimatum, “Siberia or Suicide!” (Raker’s Biographical Dictionary of Musicians, 7th ed. [New York, 1960], p. xxvii).


“My extensive study of Tchaikovsky’s psychosexuality, which addresses both his outward predicament and his inner attitudes, as well as his homosexual circle, to which I refer below, is now in preparation. But this particular issue I discuss also in my forthcoming Russian essay in Sintaksis 21 (1988).

Orlova bases her argument mainly on Tchaikovsky’s correspondence of 1875–78, published in the Soviet Union in 1940 as Pismo k rodnyam (Letters to his relatives), ed. V. A. Zhdanov, vol. 1 (1850–79), [Moscow, 1940]. Volume II never appeared. This edition of the composer’s letters, despite some editorial cuts, offers fuller texts than are found elsewhere, including Tchaikovsky’s complete works [Polonez symphoncheninski: Literaturnego pracewiedenia i pisemstwa [Moscow, 1959–81], vols. 5–8 [hereafter cited as PSM]. Because of insufficient censorship with respect to Tchaikovsky’s homosexuality, this book was “withdrawn immediately after publication” (“Last Chapter,” p. 126, n. 5). Orlova goes on to claim that “copies are now preserved only in private collections” and unavailable in the West, save for a single copy which she herself managed to smuggle out of the Soviet Union when immigrating to the United States in 1979. In fact, Pismo k rodnyam is available in Soviet libraries [see, for example, I. Staratsvet, Sovetskaya literatura o muzyke [Moscow, 1963], p. 81], as well as in some American university libraries, where the present author has had access to it.

“Of course there is no evidence of any sexual qu потом during the whole span of his life with the exception of the brief period of his marital crisis in 1875–77. Earlier he had not seen his own sexuality as a problem, while later he became reconciled to it, having found it impossible to break what he regarded ultimately as “natural inclinations” for which he was not responsible. In a way his attempt at marriage was connected with his fear of public opinion, but, as he makes clear in his letter to Modest on 28 September 1878, it was the fear of public opinion as it affected his loved ones, especially his father and sister: “Do you really believe that the consciousness that they pity and forgive me is not painful to me when, at bottom, I am guilty of nothing! And is it not a terrible thought that people who love me can sometimes be ashamed of me?” (Pismo k rodnyam, p. 259–60; whole letter translated by David Brown in Tchaikovsky: The Crisis Years, 1877–1879 [New York, 1982], pp. 105–6; italics mine). But this problem of public opinion affecting his relatives ceased to exist in his later years.

“Pismo k rodnyam, p. 374. For the sake of convenience, dates will be given in both the Old and New Styles so as to avoid any confusion caused by various usages in Mrs. Orlova’s Russian and English articles and in the chronicle of Tchaikovsky’s life, Dni i gody P. I. Chaitovskogo [Moscow/Leningrad, 1940].

“As I argue in my study in progress [see n. 11], the mysterious references in his 1884 diary to the feelings of X. X. and Z. have nothing whatsoever to do with sexuality.


“On the absence of official publicity with respect to homosexual scandals in nineteenth-century Russia, see below. Naturally Tchaikovsky was anxious about gossip, especially during the period of his marital crisis, but he could not be so naïve as to believe seriously that it might be possible to prevent it under the circumstances. Gossip of all sorts was ever a characteristic feature of the homosexual milieu with which Tchaikovsky was quite familiar. His friend Nikola T. Bochchakov, for example, was a notorious purveyor of obnoxious rumors. The composer therefore had to adjust himself psychologically to this unpleasant but unavoidable reality. About Bochchakov, see M. I. Chaitovskii, Zhizn’ P. I. Chaitovskogo, 3 vols. [Moscow/Lieipzig, 1900–02], I, 356–60 [hereafter cited as ZC]; Pismo k rodnyam, p. 222.


“The analogy of Oscar Wilde in 1895 does not work here. The action of the Marquis of Queensberry was provoked by Wilde’s bringing suit against him for slander. Tchaikovsky’s social conduct was highly conventional, and he would never have taken comparable risks.

“Last Chapter,” p. 134. In “Taina zhizni,” p. 21 [see also Spiegelman, “Trial,” p. 31], Orlova asserts a long-standing tradition of “condemning homosexuality as a criminal offence,” but in “Khleria ili samoubistvo?” p. 41, she is prepared to yield a point to the authors of “Gibbentl,” acknowledging that “because of his world fame and Alexander III’s love for music” Tchaikovsky could be spared criminal prosecution. Instead she emphasizes in her article in Kointinent 53 [1987], 330–31 his fear of “public exposure” as the deciding factor, a matter to be treated further below.

“Cf. Denal Henham’s disparaging comment on Russia.
which, in his perception, "then as now was a stern and un-

1 The pertinent article of the Penal Code in effect in the
early 1990s read: "995. A man convicted of the unnatural
vice of miscelabizhstvo [an Old Church Slavonic term for
sexual relations between men] shall for this be subject to
degradation of all rights and status and exiled to Siberia.
Furthermore, if a Christian, he shall submit to Church penance
at the direction of his spiritual adviser." (Svod Zakonov Rus-
skikh Imperii [St. Petersburg, 1857], XV, pt. 1, ch. 4).

2 V. D. Nabokov, "Plotskie prestuplenia po proektu ug-
olovnogo Ulozhenia," Shornik steti po ugolovnoupravo
[St. Petersburg: August 1893], pp. 102–25.

3 Ibid., p. 124.

4 On homosexuality and the law in Russia, see Nabokov,
Shornik steti, pp. 102–25, N. A. Nekhludov, Rukovodstvo k
osobennoi chastii russkogo ugolovnogo prava [St. Peters-
burg, 1876], I, 428–30; V. O. Mertsheuskii, Sudobne gine-
kologii [St. Petersburg, 1878], pp. 203–60; V. M.
Tamovski, Izvesshenie polovogo chuvestita [St. Peters-
burg, 1885].

5 There is no special study on the subject, but these partic-
ular conditions are observed by Tamovski, Izvesshenie,
N. A. Progavin, V kazematikii [St. Petersburg, 1909],
pp. 191, 230; and I. P. Liprandi, "Zamechanieia na 'Vos-
pominaniiia F. F. Vigelia," Chuzhnie v priematsenok ob-
shchestve drevnosti russiiskikh [Moscow, 1873], bk. 2, p.
246.

6 Prominent homosexuals in the first half of the nineteenth
century include Aleksei Golitsyn and Nikolai Rumiantsev,
respectively Minister of Education and Spiritual Affairs and
Minister of Foreign Affairs under Alexander I (see Izzy-
kovskii archiv, vol. I [St. Petersburg, 1913], p. 135, and Ser-
gei Uvarov, Minister of Education under Nicholas I [cf.
the epigrams of A. S. Pushkin on both Golitsyn and Uvarov]).

7 V. P. Obninskiij, Poslednii samoderzhetsi [Berlin, 1912], p.
34.

8 Ibid., p. 487, Peter Zaiouchkovski, The Russian Auto-
cracy under Alexander III [Academic International Press,
1976], p. 53; S. D. Urusov, Gospoda Romanov v sainy

9 G. Zakharaeva, "Krizis samoderzhavii nakonane revolu-

10 A. V. Bogdanovich, Tri poslednii samoderzhets [Mos-
cow/Leningrad, 1924], p. 68.

11 N. A. Lamsdorf, Dnevnik 1891–1892 [Moscow/Leningrad,
1934], p. 106.

12 A. S. Suvorin, Dnevnik [Moscow/Petrograd, 1923], p. 316,
see also Iu. Kartsov, "Rzhonska raspaeda, Novyi zhurnal
[1982], p. 198.

13 We should bear in mind, as was pointed out by the authors
of "Rebuttal," that Orlowa's theory is based on her faith in a
story told to her in 1966 by a man recounting what he had
heard in 1913 from a woman who had learned it from her
husband, who had died in 1902 ("Rebuttal," p. 49). Orlowa's
chief informant, Alexandr Voitov, was a former graduate of
the School of Jurisprudence (class of 1914) and an amateur
bibliographer. He claimed to have learned of this story from
Ekaterina Jacobi (erroneously called Elizaveta by Orlowa,
who was the widow of Nikolai Jacobi, one of the alleged con-
spirators and a former classmate. At the time Voitov was in
his teens, while Mrs. Jacobi was already well advanced in
years.

14 Ves' Petersburg na 1895 god, sec. 3, p. 215; ibid., sec. 1, cols.
39–41.

15 Genealogisches Handbuch der baltischen Ritterorden.
Teil: Livland [Cottice, 1930), II, 691.

16 Ibid.
on that day eight fatal outcomes (Novoe vremia, 26 Oct./7 Nov. 1893). The “Bulletin on the Progress of Cholera and Cholera-like Diseases” issued by the Medical Department of the Ministry of the Interior testifies that the epidemic, which had let up during the spring and summer, periodically waxed and waned in St. Petersburg nearly the entire autumn and winter of that year (see Pravilite'svennyi vestnik for this period). For midway of 21 October/2 November, when the composer was taken ill, a total of eighty cases were reported, seven of them new ones (this not including Tchaikovsky, Novoe vremia, 22 Oct./3 Nov. 1893). During the period of the composer’s illness (21–25 October), thirty-two people died (Novoe vremia or Novosti i bizhnevaya gazeta from 22 Oct./3 Nov. to 27 Oct./8 Nov. 1893). Between 23 and 25 October, the mortality rate increased significantly, with twenty-two deaths out of the twenty-eight cholera cases reported for this period (Pravilite'svennyi vestnik, 27 Oct./8 Nov. 1893), compared with forty cholera patients and only fifteen deaths just a few days earlier (18–21 October, Pravilite'svennyi vestnik, 24 Oct./5 Nov. 1893). Two of the thirty-two deaths between 21 and 25 October occurred at private residences, indicating that cholera could affect individuals of some means and not only the poorer strata of the population.

According to the “Bulletins on the Progress of Cholera and Cholera-like Diseases,” out of 423 cases of cholera reported for October, only 205 persons died (see Pravilite'svennyi vestnik for this period). Actually, mortality on the whole decreased in 1893 to 39 percent (Novoe vremia, 11/23 Nov. 1893).

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[Note: The text was not fully transcribed or is too fragmented to be read naturally and accurately.]
1893. After the composer's death, the sanitary commission conducted a special investigation of the water supply in the capital. The commission's findings included the presence of the cholera vibrio in water from the Neva River, and also the fact that in certain restaurants boiled water was actually being diluted with unboiled water and served to customers [Syn otechetstva, d. 8 Nov. 1893, ed. Chaikovskii, "Tiko-
vye damy," p. 245].

Two other crucial factors in his contraction of cholera were Tchaikovsky's well-known predisposition for stomach disorders and the fact, first mentioned by Figner in his interview in Novo.se i bitchevaz gazeta, that on the first day of illness the composer drank the mineral water Hu-
nieli-lanolu, which could actually stimulate the growth of the cholera vibrio. Cf. Vasili Tertenson's memoirs, where he explains this effect [Za tristosl let, p. 99].

Moderst's account.

Ibid.

The premiere was, in fact, postponed, probably because of the composer's death, but only for a couple of days, so that it took place the very evening of the day of Tchaikovsky's fun-
ereal. And many perceived this as lack of tact on Modest's part (see Novo.se vremia, 28 Oct.9 Nov. 1893).

Moderst's account.

Ibid. Alina Briliulla was the mother of Nikolai Konrad, Modest's long-time, dead-mute pupil. Her mem-
ories were written in 1929, when she probably could refresh her recollections by reading Modest's account, but her psycholog-
ical details and insights concerning the life of Tchaikovsky's brothers make her testimony a valuable source.

Moderst's account.

Ibid. Cf. Vasili Tertenson's memoirs, with his implied apology that he "had never encountered the disease before" (an instructive piece of social history: society doctors of Ber-
tenson's stature obviously never treated the poor!), but that ultimately he "was left with no doubt that Piotr Il'ich had a classic case of cholera" [Za tristosl let, p. 98, also in VC, p. 342]. The fact, however, remains that until his brother's arrival time continued to pass without the pronouncement of a firm diagnosis.

Ibid. Vasili Tertenson, Za tristosl let, p. 98.

Ibid. P. I. Chaikovskogo in Novo.se vremia, 27 Oct./8 Nov. 1893, also reprinted in VC, pp. 425-26, and translated into English by David Brown in "Last Chapter," p. 1, pp. 138-39 (hereafter cited as Berenson interview). There is some disagreement concerning the time of Mod-
est's return home that day. Modest said he was back at eight o'clock, i.e., before the arrival of Vasili Berenson [Moderst's account], while according to Briliulla, he was sent for only after Vasili Berenson had made his examination and was "found in the theater" [VC, p. 119].

Berenson interview. Cf. Figner's account: "[Lev] Bernar-
dovitch ... diagnosed the nastiest form of Asiatic cholera, he assured us that he had had no prior occasion to confront this particular form of it" [Novo.se i bitchevaz gazeta, 26 Oct./7 Nov.].

Ibid. He is incomprehensible why Berenson and Modest, writing while events were still fresh, should continually disagree in their evidence. When the doctor indicates that Tchaikovsky had begun to suffer spasms, Modest, speaking of the exact same phase, asserts that there were no spasms. She also alleges discrepancies between Modest and the medical bulletins: "While the first bulletin, posted at 2:30 p.m., reports that 'the dangerous symptoms are still present, and are not responsive to treatment' and the sec-
ond, posted at 10:30 p.m., that 'since 3:30 p.m. there has been increasing weakness,' Modest reports that after a bath
at 2:00 p.m. and injections (that is, after two hours) 'his condition seemed to us to improve' until 8:00 p.m. Since it is impossible to disbelieve the medical bulletins, one has seri-
ously to doubt all Modest's reports concerning both the on-
set and the end of the illness." And Figner's: "Lev Berner-
sen ...[14] believed that the effect that his recollections of Tchaikovsky's illness do not coincide with the picture drawn by Modest [Piotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky, Letters to his Family (New York, 1981), p. 555]. Flagrant discrepancies between witnesses' accounts of the same event is a well-known phenomenon in juridical practice.

The alleged discrepancies between Modest's account and the medical bulletins are in fact illusory. The first bulletin cited by Orlova was posted at 2:30, i.e., half an hour after the bath. It tells us that "the dangerous symptoms are still present, and are not responsive to treatment" ["Last Chap-
ter," p. 145]. Modest speaks of this very moment: "The patient did not have the anticipated result, though it produced a strong sweat, at the same time, according to the doctors, it reduced for a while the signs of blood poisoning from the urine. The perspiring continued, but at the same time the pulse, which up till then had been comparatively strong, again weakened" [Moderst's account]. It is clear that the same situation is described in both texts: no improvement in the patient's condition. Only after injections (two hours later, according to Orlova herself) did the signs of a tempo-
rary and brief recovery appear, which naturally could not have been reflected in the first bulletin. The second bulletin was posted at 10:30 p.m., after this temporary remission had already ended — at 8:15 the pulse had weakened sharply, sending the patient into a coma. So despite the fact that "up to 8:00 p.m. his condition seemed to us to improve," the general picture was in comparison one of irreversible wors-
ening. Hence the language of the second bulletin is under-
standable: "Since 3:00 p.m. and up until 10:30 there has been increasing weakness," ["Last Chapter," p. 145]. Cf. Ma-
drovsky's interview in Novo.se i bitchevaz gazeta, 26 Oct./7

Berenson interview. (The text of this editorial introduc-
tion is absent in "Last Chapter," p. 138.)

Ibid. Novo.se vremia, 28 Oct./9 Nov. 1893.

After reporting Tchaikovsky's explanation "Let me go! Do not torment yourself," etc., which according to Modest occurred on Saturday, the doctor proceeds without warning to the events of Sunday, leaving an impression that he is still talking about Saturday [Berenson interview]. In any case, the very first account to appear in the press, the interview with Dr. Mamovoy of the day before, had already provided an accurate chronological sequence of events.

This point is stated most clearly in the recollections of Alina Briliulla, VC, p. 119.

Public opinion did not hesitate to accuse him of incompe-
tence for this reason too, among others, see below.

Berenson interview. Cf. Modest: "My elder brother [Ni-
kolaj and I automatically had a superstitious fear of this necessary measure. Our fear increased when we heard that, when the doctor asked my brother whether he wished to take the bath, he replied, "I'm very glad to have a bath, but I shall probably die like my mother when you put me into the bath." *

**Note:** These various considerations may explain why Bertsson made no effort to rectify the order of events in his account in accordance with Nathanov's interview published the day before. He naturally preferred to concentrate on purely medical issues and was less interested in strict chronological accuracy.

She persistently claims that "conditions in Modest's apartment were quite contrary to the standing regulations" and that there was a "disregard of the most basic and obligatory sanitary precautions" ("Last Chapter," pp. 128, 129).

The general implausibility of this argument has already been pointed out by the authors of "Rebusital," p. 49.

In the case of death through cholera, the body is to be removed from the home as quickly as possible in a tightly sealed coffin, in addition, funeral and funeral banquets attended by many people should be avoided ("Last Chapter," p. 129, n. 14). **Pravitel'stvenny vestnik,** 2/14 July 1892. They suggested, for instance, to those coming into contact with cholera patients only such obvious sanitary measures as: "wash hands as frequently as possible with soap or some disinfecting solution... neither eat nor drink in the patient's room... when leaving the patient, clean all clothing, shoes, etc."

It was precisely these measures that, although natural among educated society, were poorly observed by the lower classes, as was well known. **Pravitel'stvenny vestnik,** 9/21 June 1892.

**Note:** Published in Pravitel'stvenny vestnik, 9/21 June 1892 and 25 Mar./6 Apr. 1893. According to both editions, "isolation of cholera patients should be effected either in the homes where they have fallen ill or by removal of the patient from his home to a medical institution." Also, "the bodies of those who have died from cholera should be wrapped in a shroud moistened with a substantive solution and, insofar as possible, placed quickly into the coffin."

Finally, "homes in which there have been cases of illness or death from cholera should be visited immediately and without fail by those persons specially designated to carry out measures concerning disinfection of extractions, clothing, linen, and rooms of the sick or dead." **Pravitel'stvenny vestnik,** 9/21 June 1892, cf. "Last Chapter," pp. 130-31, "Taina smerti," p. 22.

**Pravitel'stvenny vestnik,** 25 Mar./6 Apr. 1893.

**Note:** An anticholera Congress was held in St. Petersburg in December of 1892, and the Twelfth (Extraordinary) Provincial Congress of Physicians in Moscow in March of 1893.

**Note:** Last Chapter," p. 128. This is especially significant given the later storm of indignation in the press over the methods of the deceased's treatment and public charges of incompetence against his doctors.

Ibid. David Brown also uses this quotation from Rimsky-Korsakov's memoirs, written ten years later, in his article on Tchaikovsky in New Grove Russian Masters 1, pp. 224, 226. In the passage of this, see Vasilii lastrebiev's diary entry for 25 October 1893 (Rimsky-Korsakov, L. 126), also, Novosti i bizhevaya gazeta, 26 Oct./7 Nov. 1893.

**Note:** N. Rimsky-Korsakov, Polnoe sobranie sochinenii: Literатурnye proizvedenii i perepiska (Moscow, 1955-), L, 193, cf. Judah A. Joffe's abridged translation, Nikolay A. Rimsky-Korsakov, My Musical Life (New York, 1942), p. 340. As has been established by the research of N. O. Blinov and K. Lu. Davydova, the composer's face was after his death actually rinsed with carabolic acid (Chaikovsky, "Pikovye damy," p. 245).

Olra, "Taina smerti," p. 23. Speigelman in his summary of Mrs. Olra's argument already states that the coffin was sealed on the second (not the final) day, 26 Octo-

ber ("Tsieli," p. 50). In "Last Chapter" and "Kholera ili samoukhlizovl" this issue of when the coffin was sealed is avoided.

**Note:** Last Chapter," pp. 128-29, 133, n. 33.

Novoe vremia, 26 Oct./7 Nov. 1893, also ibid., 27 Oct./8 Nov. 1893. On the disinfection of the apartment, see the memoirs of tser'e and Davydov in PCP, pp. 280, 336, cf. Novoe vremia, 27 Oct./8 Nov. 1893, Chaikovsky, "Pikovye damy," pp. 244-45. There were 2,353 disinfections of apartments carried out in St. Petersburg during 1893 alone (Ves Petersburga na 1893 god, supp., col. 81).

**Note:** Petersburgskaiia gazeta, 26 Oct./7 Nov. 1893, also in Lidia Koniskaia, Chaikovsky v Petersburge, 2nd edn. (Leningrad, 1974), p. 294, in her attempts at reconstituting the period prior to the funeral, Koniskaia (and subsequently Olra, who appears to have relied on her) fell victim to the confusion presumably caused by an error in the issue of Novoe vremia for 27 Oct./8 Nov. At the beginning of the chronicle, instead of "Today, 26 October," there was printed "Today, 25 October," followed by an account of the four requisitions of 26 October, in confused order. The error in the dating and order of the requisitions may be corrected by comparing reports in the same paper on each of the two days, as well as in other papers (see, for example, Novosti i bizhevaya gazeta, 26 Oct./7 Nov. 1893).

**Note:** Novosti i bizhevaya gazeta, 26 Oct./7 Nov. 1893.

Novoe vremia, 27 Oct./8 Nov. 1893. It should be noted that this report, delayed as it was by more than a day, might cause some confusion. Although dated 25 October, it starts off with "Yesterday evening," i.e., seemingly 24 October, which makes little sense since at that time the composer was still alive. This error in the timeline can easily be rectified by comparing chronicles from other newspapers, nevertheless, this complication disoriented both Koniskaia and Olra, who decided that preventative measures were not implemented until 26 October, that is, the eve of the Novoe vremia report.

**Note:** Novosti i bizhevaya gazeta, 26 Oct./7 Nov. 1893.

**Note:** N. D. Kashkin, Vospominania o P. I. Chaikovskom (Moscow, 1954), p. 183. Kashkin's reminiscences were composed shortly after Tchaikovsky's death and their serial publication in Russkoe obozrenie began as early as 1894, so once again Olra is mistaken in her assertion that all the information about preventative measures is either second-hand or of much later date. Reference to Kashkin's arrival in St. Petersburg is found in Novoe vremia, 27 Oct./8 Nov. 1893.

**Note:** The natural newspaper practice of reporting events a day later obviously confused Soviet compilers of the chronicle Trudy dni, who date his funeral 29 October/10 November. Notice of when the funeral would be held was published in all St. Petersburg papers on 27 October/8 November 1893.

**Note:** The very fact of the appearance in print of so-detailed a description of the course of the illness and the methods of treatment, recalling an article from a medical journal (Olra, "Kholera ili samoukhlizovl" p. 39, cf. "Last Chapter," p. 129).

**Note:** "How could Tchaikovsky, living, amid excellent hygienic conditions and having just arrived in Petersburg, have become infected?" (Petersburgskaiia gazeta, 26 Oct./7 Nov. 1893), or, "The most contradictory rumors are afloat in the city with regard both to the causes of P. I. Tchaikovsky's illness and to his death." (Novosti i bizhevaya gazeta, 26 Oct./7 Nov. 1893).
7 Nov. 1893). See also Iuri Davydov, who mentions in his recollections written in 1940 that "in the pages of certain newspapers..."

19th-century music 19th-century music

[Image 0x0 to 601x775]

Novoe vremia, 28 Oct./9 Nov. 1893.

Novoe vremia, 5/17 Nov. 1893.

Ibid., cf. the section "O chem govorit" in Novosti i bizhevaia gazeta, 7/19 Nov. 1893.

Novoe vremia, 7/19 Nov. 1893. The newspaper material nearly supports the recollections of Sergei Bortens (Vokrug izkusstva, p. 20–21), whose veracity is implicitly questioned by Mrs. Orlova (Novoe russkoe slovo, 13 Jan. 1893). He never takes advantage of the opportunity for defending his father’s reputation against the charges of incompetence by disclosing the “truth” about Tchaikovsky’s alleged suicide. Instead, he emphasizes Bortens’s friendly concern for the Bortenson’s professional image. Modest’s involvement and his sympathy for the physician is also evident from the recollections by Suvarin in Modest’s correspondence with Alexander Siloti (whose...)

Whatever may have been the circumstances of this unknown and somewhat hypothetical letter, it is possible to point to the existence of another communication to Modest from Bortens, one which has been published. This is the note of condolences dated 25 October/6 November (the day of the composer’s death) and which mentions “the dread disease that carried off your cherished brother” (see correspondent, Tchaikovsky [New York, 1943], p. 364). The note contains absolutely nothing suspicious, not a single word which might sound unnatural. Moreover, as Nicolas Sioninsky, who discovered the note at the Museum at Klin in 1938, has correctly pointed out: “It is inconceivable that such a letter written at such a moment to Tchaikovsky’s own brother by a physician and a friend would contain an attempt at concealment of the true circumstances of Tchaikovsky’s death” (Ibid.).

The exact dating of Bortens’s letter might have helped in ascertaining at what stage of the controversy it was written and therefore precisely what tactical purpose it would then have served. One should not rule out the possibility that Modest, dissatisfied with the confusion in the published interview, might simply have requested Bortens’s testimony for archival and documentary reasons. In composing this document, the physician had to rely on his own recollections and, most probably, on the medical records made by his assistants. Malcolm Brown has given in private communications a different interpretation to this hypothetical letter. He proposes that Bortens wrote it as a response to the imputations in the press that he had not treated his patient correctly, and that he wished to affirm to Modest that he had followed the best possible course. Hence, he felt the need to describe in detail the course of the illness and what had been done at each stage along the way; this would be his reassurance to Modest that everything that could have been done had been done. Such a letter would be Bortens’s way of justifying himself to Tchaikovsky’s family. If it preceded Modest’s public letter of 7/19 November, then this interpretation is strengthened.