Clearing a Misunderstanding: Rehearing Tchaikovsky's Violin Concerto (1878) with the "Changing Background" Technique

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Research Question

How does hearing Tchaikovsky’s Violin Concerto (2nd movement) in terms of Russian structural paradigms (instead of Austro-Germanic ones), including the "Changing Background Technique", help us understand its early reception?

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Subquestion:

Is it possible that the concerto was misunderstood at its premiere because it was measured by Austro-German, instead of Russian technical standards?

Context

- Composed in 1878 in presence of, and helped by, Yosif Kotek
- Premiered in 1881 in Vienna (Adolf Brodsky)
- Dedication disaster
- First review disaster

“The Russian composer Tchaikovsky is an inflated [talent], without discrimination or taste. Such is also his long and pretentious Violin Concerto. [...] But soon vulgarity gains the upper hand. The violin is no longer played; it is pulled, torn, shredded. The [second movement] Adagio is on its best behavior. But it breaks off to make way for a finale that transfers us to the brutal and wretched jollity of a Russian holiday. We see plainly the savage, vulgar faces; we hear curses, we smell vodka.” - E. Hanslick

Yosif Kotek and Tchaikovsky

Literature Review

James Hepokoski, “Issues of Meaning in Music”

Historical “life and works” sources, which discuss the early reception of Tchaikovsky’s concerto

Tchaikovsky’s letters and other primary sources, including reviews, that throw light on the premiere.

Sources on Russian Nationalism and the “Changing Background” technique.

Method

- Russian Nationalism Technique: “Changing Background” Technique

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- Rooted in composer Mikhail Glinka, “father of Russian Nationalism”

Definition of “Changing Background” Technique

- Variation form first used by Mikhail Glinka

- modular, nondevelopmental repetition

Kamarinskaya (Orchestral Fantasy, 1848)

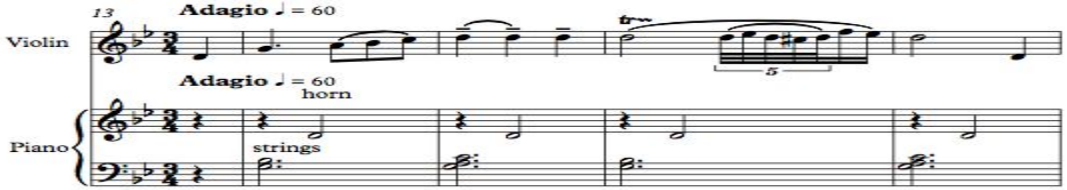
Analysis: “Changing Background” Technique: m. 13-19; 20-27

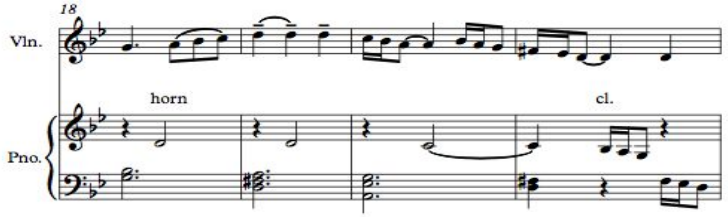
- Opening theme in strings and French horn, echoed by the clarinet
- Theme has an internal repetition, breaks down into 4 measures antecedent, and 4 measures consequent (both start the same way).

“Changing background” technique: second time (m. 20-27) the accompaniment goes from dotted half notes to quarter and eighth notes, in other words, it uses *rhythmic diminution.*

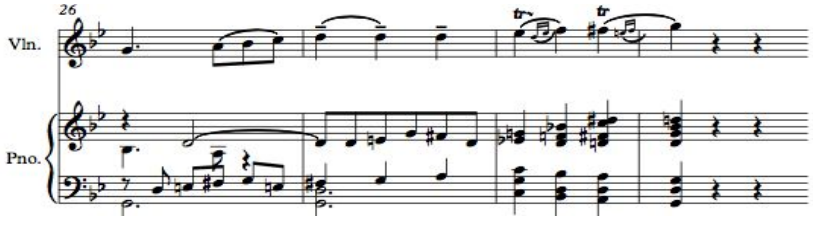
Analysis: “Changing Background” Technique: m. 13-19; 20-27

Example 1





Example 2



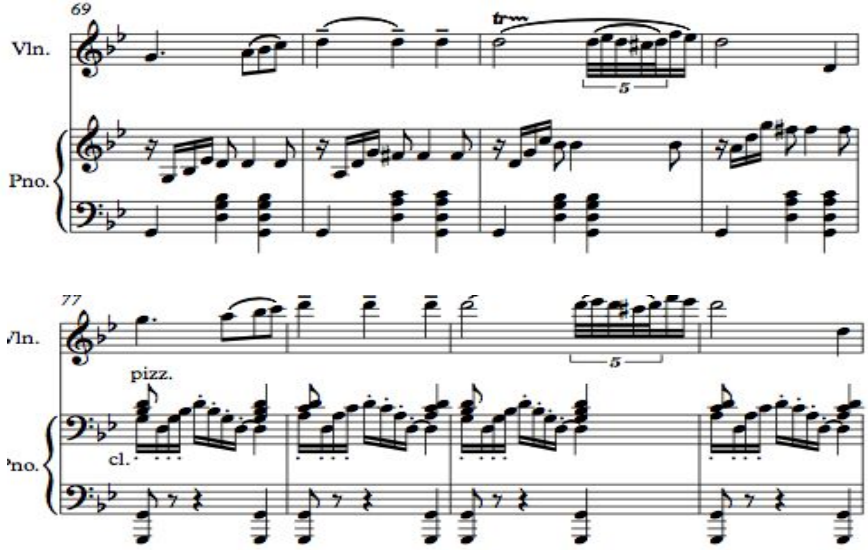
Analysis: “Changing Background” Technique: m. 69-76; 77-84

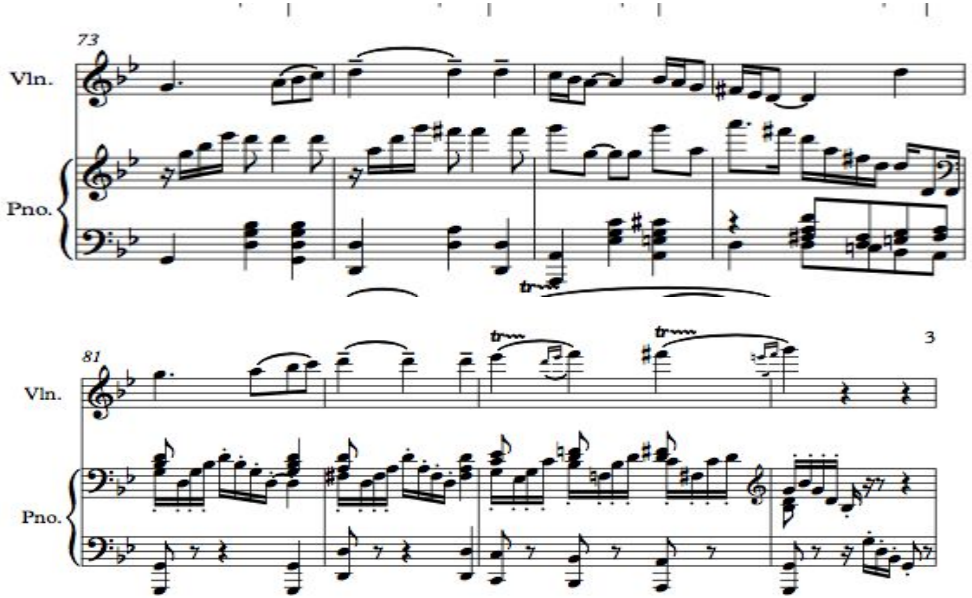
- Clarinet and flute take the moving theme while strings use pizzicato within the first four measures (mm. 69-73).
- In the second four measures it is only the clarinet that plays the countermelody with the solo violin.
- Tchaikovsky also takes the solo violinist up an octave in mm. 77-84.

“Changing background” technique: Tchaikovsky uses broken rhythms for the clarinet and flute in his first theme and a continuous rhythm with just the clarinet for the repetition; this change of background creates the illusion that a lot has changed, although the changes were, in fact, subtle.

Analysis: “Changing Background” Technique: m. 69-76; 77-84

Example 2





Conclusion