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

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Clearing a Misunderstanding: Rehearing Tchaikovsky’s Violin Concerto (1878) with the “Changing Background” Technique

Valparaiso University Symposium on Undergraduate Research and Creative Expression (Source)

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Slide 1
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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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?

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
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
Method

- Russian Nationalism Technique: “Changing Background” Technique
- 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