

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



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

Musical score for Example 1, measures 13-19. The score is in 3/4 time, marked *Adagio* with a tempo of $\text{♩} = 60$. The key signature has two flats. The Violin part (top staff) begins at measure 13 with a melodic line that includes a trill in measure 15. The Piano part (bottom staff) is divided into strings and horn. The strings play a rhythmic accompaniment, while the horn plays a melodic line that changes in measure 15. A fermata is placed over the horn part in measure 15.

Musical score for Example 1, measures 18-27. The Violin part (top staff) continues the melodic line. The Piano part (bottom staff) is divided into horn and clarinet (cl.). The horn plays a melodic line that changes in measure 20, and the clarinet plays a melodic line that changes in measure 22. A fermata is placed over the horn part in measure 20.

Example 2

Musical score for Example 2, measures 22-27. The Violin part (top staff) continues the melodic line. The Piano part (bottom staff) is divided into strings and horn. The strings play a rhythmic accompaniment, while the horn plays a melodic line that changes in measure 24. A fermata is placed over the horn part in measure 24.

Musical score for Example 2, measures 26-27. The Violin part (top staff) continues the melodic line. The Piano part (bottom staff) is divided into strings and horn. The strings play a rhythmic accompaniment, while the horn plays a melodic line that changes in measure 26. A fermata is placed over the horn part in measure 26.

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

69

Vln.

Pno.

trww

5

Detailed description: This block shows the first system of the musical score, covering measures 69 to 76. The Violin (Vln.) part is in the upper staff, starting with a whole note G4, followed by quarter notes A4, B4, and C5, then a trill (trww) over a five-note chromatic scale (D5, C5, B4, A4, G4) marked with a '5'. The Piano (Pno.) part is in the lower staff, featuring a complex rhythmic pattern with eighth and sixteenth notes, and a five-note chromatic scale (D5, C5, B4, A4, G4) marked with a '5'.

77

Vln.

Pno.

pizz.

cl.

5

Detailed description: This block shows the second system of the musical score, covering measures 77 to 84. The Violin (Vln.) part is in the upper staff, starting with a whole note G4, followed by quarter notes A4, B4, and C5, then a trill (trww) over a five-note chromatic scale (D5, C5, B4, A4, G4) marked with a '5'. The Piano (Pno.) part is in the lower staff, featuring a complex rhythmic pattern with eighth and sixteenth notes, and a five-note chromatic scale (D5, C5, B4, A4, G4) marked with a '5'. The piano part is marked 'pizz.' (pizzicato) and 'cl.' (clarinet).

73

Vln.

Pno.

trww

Detailed description: This block shows the third system of the musical score, covering measures 73 to 80. The Violin (Vln.) part is in the upper staff, starting with a whole note G4, followed by quarter notes A4, B4, and C5, then a trill (trww) over a five-note chromatic scale (D5, C5, B4, A4, G4). The Piano (Pno.) part is in the lower staff, featuring a complex rhythmic pattern with eighth and sixteenth notes, and a five-note chromatic scale (D5, C5, B4, A4, G4).

81

Vln.

Pno.

trww

trww

3

Detailed description: This block shows the fourth system of the musical score, covering measures 81 to 84. The Violin (Vln.) part is in the upper staff, starting with a whole note G4, followed by quarter notes A4, B4, and C5, then a trill (trww) over a five-note chromatic scale (D5, C5, B4, A4, G4) marked with a '3'. The Piano (Pno.) part is in the lower staff, featuring a complex rhythmic pattern with eighth and sixteenth notes, and a five-note chromatic scale (D5, C5, B4, A4, G4).

Conclusion