



Tchaikovsky (Master Musicians Series)

By Roland John Wiley

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A giant in the pantheon of 19th century composers, Tchaikovsky continues to enthrall audiences today. From the *Nutcracker*--arguably the most popular ballet currently on the boards--*Swan Lake*, and *Sleeping Beauty*, to *Eugene Onegin* and *Pique Dame*, to the *Symphony Pathetique* and the always rousing, canon-blasting *1812 Overture*--this prolific and beloved composer's works are perennial favorites. Now, John Wiley, a renowned Tchaikovsky scholar, provides a fresh biography aimed in classic Master Musicians style at the student and music lover. Wiley deftly draws on documents from imperial, Soviet, and post-Soviet era sources, providing a more balanced look at recent controversies surrounding the marriage, death, and sexuality of the composer. The author dovetails the biographical material with separate chapters that treat the music thoroughly and fully, work-by-work, with more substantial explorations of Tchaikovsky's most familiar compositions. These analyses present new, even iconoclastic perspectives on the music and the composer's intent and expression. Several informative appendices, in the Master Musicians format, include an exhaustive list of works and bibliography.

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Editorial Review

Review

"An important and serious work by a respected Tchaikovsky scholar that is informative, entertaining, and useful in understanding and appreciating the composer's life and music. Highly recommended!" --*Slavic and East European Journal*

"Roland John Wiley has written a masterful re-evaluation of Tchaikovsky's life and work. He uses sources critically and discusses the music as serious art, worthy of inclusion in the Western canon on its merits. No other biography of Tchaikovsky surpasses his achievement." Robert W. Oldani, Arizona State University

"It is a formidable challenge to present a comprehensive life-and-works study of Tchaikovsky in one volume, but the author has risen to it with aplomb. He presents us with a great deal of new information from previously censored, as well as neglected sources, and his approach throughout is refreshingly clear and objective." Rosamund Bartlett, *Chekhov: Scenes from a Life* (Simon and Schuster/Free Press, 2004)

"...an intrepid scholar...Wiley's knowledge of primary and secondary sources is extraordinary...tremendously useful..."--*Opera News*

"...the rare volume that ought to satisfy professional musicians and general readers alike...a smart, questing and refreshingly clear-sighted companion to the man and his work."--*The Washington Post*

"Offers straightforward, concise synopses, along with analyses of the musical highlights...A valuable research resource."--*Opera News*

"The reader is granted a more detailed picture of Tchaikovsky's day-to-day life than has been achieved in any single-volume biography of the composer to date...The book is prodigiously well documented and annotated, and can be profitably read as a guide to the vast secondary literature." --*Music & Letters*

About the Author

Roland John Wiley is Professor of Music at the University of Michigan and is the author of *Tchaikovsky's*

Ballets.

From The Washington Post

From The Washington Post's Book World/washingtonpost.com Reviewed by Tim Page Writing a serious biography of a universally beloved musician is a challenging task because the book's audience is extraordinarily diverse. If an author takes on an obscure subject such as Ferruccio Busoni or Dick Twardzik, the intended reader is likely to be a musician as well, which permits incorporation of some detailed and specific technical analysis. But popular biographies of, say, Luciano Pavarotti, Frank Sinatra or Elvis Presley tend to be little more than studies in personality -- souvenirs of favorite artists, as it were, that make no real attempt to explain just what these artists did. Roland John Wiley's "Tchaikovsky," part of the ongoing "Master Musicians" series from Oxford University Press, is the rare volume that ought to satisfy professional musicians and general readers alike. Wiley tells us a story, and a poignant one, yet this is also a substantial examination of Tchaikovsky's work, colorfully described and authoritatively judged. If some of the chapters are a little technical for the lay reader, the book is arranged so that it is easy to jump ahead and catch up with Wiley's retelling of a sad but productive life. Tchaikovsky seems to have been a child prodigy in everything but music. By the age of 7, he was writing poetry and essays in impeccable French, but he did not take up music until he was in his 20s. Quickly making up for lost time, he finished his first symphony at the age of 26 and his first opera only two years after that. Thereafter, he composed speedily, brilliantly, with innate assurance. The grand opera "Pique Dame" was drafted in 43 days, and the monumental opening movement of his final symphony ("Pathetique") was finished in less than a week. "With no particular reason for rejoicing I can experience a happy creative mood and, on the other hand, in the happiest circumstances I might write music filled with darkness and despair," he wrote in 1878. "The artist lives a double life -- an everyday, human one, and an artistic one and these two lives do not always coincide." A double life, indeed. Tchaikovsky, the most celebrated Russian musician of his day, lionized throughout the world (such was his fame that he was summoned to America to open Carnegie Hall), was also a self-tormenting and quasi-alcoholic gay man. In one of several previously censored letters that Wiley has translated and printed for the first time, Tchaikovsky spoke openly to his brother: "Cursed buggermania forms an impassable gulf between me and most people. It imparts to my character an estrangement, fear of people, shyness, immoderate bashfulness, mistrust, in a word, a thousand traits from which I am getting ever more unsociable. Imagine that often, and for hours at a time, I think about a monastery or something of the kind." Convinced that his homosexuality could be "cured" (yet another proof that bad ideas know no statute of limitations), Tchaikovsky married one of his students, from whom he fled nine weeks later, in a state of near-madness. He made a happier association with a wealthy widow, Nadezhda von Meck, who admired his music and insisted upon becoming his patron. They wrote long and intimate letters to each other yet agreed that they would never meet in person; with the exception of one awkward and mutually embarrassing encounter, they didn't. Wiley has examined this unusual friendship in considerable detail and offers plausible hypotheses for Meck's sudden cessation of all support, emotional and financial, in 1890. Three years later, Tchaikovsky was dead at the age of 53, from an attack of cholera that he supposedly brought on by drinking a glass of unboiled water. Right away it was suggested that he'd intended to kill himself -- even, by some conspiracy theorists, that he was ordered to kill himself because of his affair with a young nobleman. "That he committed suicide cannot be doubted," the "New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians" stated in 1981. Wiley is nowhere near so smug as all that. "The events of those last days are now obscured beyond hope of clarity by time and intervention," he writes. "We do not and probably never will know beyond doubt the cause of Tchaikovsky's death." Never mind: The music survives and is playing everywhere. Tchaikovsky, who was once dismissed as a guilty pleasure (it used to be said that nobody loved him but the public), is now recognized as one of the very great composers of the 19th century, and his stature continues to grow. Wiley has given us a smart, questing and refreshingly clear-sighted companion to the man and his work.

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Users Review

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