



**George (Kurti) Plohn (left) followed up on a rather intriguing question that arose during a Trivia quiz played in pleasant company.**

### **Did Tchaikovsky commit suicide?**

*Researched by George Plohn*

During a recent Friday pre-lunch Trivia presentation one of the questions was about who was the famous Russian composer who died by committing suicide. As nobody could come up with a reply, Karen, our moderator, announced that according to the card it was Tchaikovsky. Some of us in the audience, however, protested that this is not so. With that, *nolens volens*, the question was put to rest.

But then later in the day, I was so intrigued by this possibility that I took upon myself to make some research on this subject. And here is what I found out.



Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky (1840 – 1893, often anglicized as Peter Ilyich Tchaikovsky, was a Russian composer of the late-Romantic period, some of his works being among the most popular music in the classical repertoire. Tchaikovsky was born in Kamsko Votinsk, a small town in the Ural mountains. His father, Ilya Petrovich, was a mining engineer; his mother was French, musical, delicate and epileptic. From her, he inherited his sensitive nature and his tendency to hypochondria.

He was the first Russian composer whose music made a lasting impression internationally, bolstered by his appearances as a guest conductor in Europe and the United States (He was here in 1991 to inaugurate the newly built Carnegie Hall). Tchaikovsky was honored in 1884, by Czar Alexander III, and awarded a lifetime pension. A musical genius and a national hero. But this great composer had also a secret personal life. He struggled all his life with his many personal demons, including his homosexuality and his intense emotionality. On his other side, he was well known for his candor and sides, and this ultimately led to his very unhappy and tortured life.

Discussion of Tchaikovsky's personal life, especially his sexuality, has perhaps been the most extensive of any composer in the 19th century and certainly of any Russian composer of his time. It has also, at times, caused considerable confusion, from later Soviet efforts to expunge all references to

same-sex attraction and portray him as a heterosexual. Biographers have generally agreed that Tchaikovsky was homosexual. He sought the company of other men in his circle for extended periods, associating openly and establishing professional connections with them. However, the degree to which the composer might have felt comfortable with his sexual nature has remained open to debate. It is still unknown whether Tchaikovsky, according to musicologist and his biographer David Brown, "felt tainted within himself, defiled by something from which he finally realized he could never escape" or whether he experienced "no unbearable guilt" over his sexual nature and "eventually came to see his sexual peculiarities as an insurmountable and even natural part of his personality ... without experiencing any serious psychological damage.

Tchaikovsky lived as a bachelor for most of his life. In 1868, aged 28, he met Belgian soprano Désirée Artôt. They became infatuated with each other and were engaged to be married but due to Artôt's refusal to give up the stage or settle in Russia, the relationship ended. Tchaikovsky later claimed she was the only woman he ever loved. In 1877, at the age of 37, he received love letters from a mentally unbalanced music student Antonina Milyukova. Tchaikovsky was, of course, gay, but he was inclined to deny his own nature. He wrote to his brother: "I am aware that my inclinations are the greatest and most unconquerable obstacle to my happiness. I must fight my nature with all my strength. I shall do everything possible to marry this year. I will marry whoever will have me." Tchaikovsky did not want to refuse Antonina Milyukova, so he married her, hoping for his much desired "normal" family life. It was, however, a disaster. Mismatched psychologically and sexually, the couple lived together for only two and a half months before Tchaikovsky left, overwrought emotionally and suffering from an acute composer's block. Tchaikovsky's marital debacle may have forced him to face the full truth about his sexuality, however he never blamed Antonina for the failure of their marriage. Tchaikovsky blamed himself. It brought him to the brink of suicide (he even waded into the river Neva, but all he got was to get wet), and within weeks of the wedding, he fled to the safety of his

brother's house in St. Petersburg. He never saw his wife again, though they were never divorced. Three years after Tchaikovsky's death, she was pronounced insane, and ended up in an asylum, where she spent the rest of her life.

Fast forward to his ultimate end: On October 16, 1893, Tchaikovsky conducted the premiere of his monumental Sixth Symphony, also called the *Pathétique*, in Saint Petersburg. But then, nine days later, Tchaikovsky died there, aged 53. He was interred in St. Petersburg's Alexander Nevsky Monastery. Eight thousand mourners attended his funeral.

A tragic figure, who gave us some of the best music ever written.

While Tchaikovsky's death has traditionally been attributed to cholera from drinking unboiled water at a local restaurant, as one story accounts, many writers have theorized that his death was a suicide. Opinion has been summarized as follows: "The polemics over Tchaikovsky's death have reached an impasse... Rumors attached to the famous die hard ... As for illness, problems of evidence offer little hope of satisfactory resolution: the state of diagnosis; the confusion of witnesses; disregard of long-term effects of smoking and alcohol. We do not know how Tchaikovsky died. We may never find out.

But then, the explanation of Tchaikovsky's death brought forth nearly a century later by the Russian musicologist Alexandra Orlova is considerably more chilling and frankly depressing. In 1893, i.e. the year when he later died, Tchaikovsky had an affair with an 18-year old nobleman named Alexandre Vladimirovich Stenbok-Fermor. The young man's uncle, Count Alexei Alexandrovich Stenbok-Fermor, discovered the liaison and wrote an angry letter denouncing Tchaikovsky to his close friend, Czar Alexander III. The count entrusted the letter to a lawyer, one Nicholai Jacobi, for delivery to the czar. By sheer coincidence, Jacobi had been a classmate of Tchaikovsky's

at the Imperial School of Jurisprudence. On discovering the contents of the letter, chose not to deliver it but instead brought together a “court of honor” – seven of Tchaikovsky’s former schoolmates living in Saint Petersburg, all of them by then senior lawyers or distinguished politicians – and summoned Tchaikovsky before them. They told him that they would withhold the letter from the czar, avoiding disgrace and scandal for him and the school, only if he committed suicide.

Draw your own conclusions, whatever those are....



*Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky*