



Tchaikovsky: The Crisis Years, 1874-1878

David Brown

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With the second volume of this authoritative study of Tchaikovsky's life and music, we come to the crucial years that established him among the world's leading composers and almost destroyed him as a man.

In the opening chapters he approaches the central crisis of his whole existence: his marriage to Antonina Milyukova. The marriage was a desperate gesture, a hopeless attempt to balance, or at least disguise, his strongly homosexual nature. But only five days after the wedding he wrote to his brother Anatoly, "Physically my wife has become totally repugnant to me." David Brown has had access to some of Tchaikovsky's most revealing letters; they were printed in Russia in 1940, but suppressed before publication, and in 1979, one of the few surviving copies was smuggled out of the country.

Dr. Brown also provides a fascinating picture of the composer's long and strange relationship with his benefactress, Mrs. von Meck. By mutual agreement, they never met, yet their friendship produced a prodigious and often passionately expressed correspondence.

This was the period of some of Tchaikovsky's masterpieces: the first piano concerto, *Swan Lake*, the fourth symphony, *Eugene Onegin*, *Francesca de Rimini*, and the violin concerto. The book is at least as important a contribution to musical scholarship as to biography.

As biography, it is steadily absorbing in its portrayal of a man and an artist striving to keep the creative spark alive, often overcome by melancholy, fleeing from one part of Europe to another, but always breaking through to new triumphs. Unquestionably, this is going to be the definitive work on Tchaikovsky in English for many years to come.

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