

Source and sorcery

‘Tenuous, weak and vapid’ or ‘a little piece of magic’?

DAVID BRUCE looks sympathetically at *The fairy's kiss*.

FOR A work that sits directly between two of Stravinsky's most celebrated scores, *Apollo* and the *Symphony of psalms*, *The fairy's kiss* suffers from a curiously low critical reputation. Paul Griffiths speaks of its ‘creative humility’¹; the Stravinsky expert Eric Walter White describes much of it as ‘tenuous, weak and vapid’; and Peter Van den Toorn's voluminous *The music of Igor Stravinsky* fails to mention it at all. What are we to make of this critical disapproval and this apparently sudden and brief decline in Stravinsky's creative powers? Was the piece written, as White would have it, ‘against time and with a sense of strain’;² or should we side with Diaghilev's famous tirade against the piece after the opening night: ‘Stravinsky, our famous Igor... has given himself up entirely to the love of God and cash.’³ or is the critical backlash unjustified – an onslaught against something that, in its glorification of Tchaikovsky and the romantic tradition has simply been out of sync with the *zeitgeist*? To answer some of these questions we must first look at the reasons Stravinsky might have had for choosing to base *The fairy's kiss* on Tchaikovsky's music and at the nature of the relationship between the two composers.

Stravinsky derived several melodies, some harmonic progressions and other fragments of *The fairy's kiss* from various early Tchaikovsky piano pieces and songs, as well as some more generalised stylistic traits from other works, notably the ballets and the Fifth Symphony. He first heard Tchaikovsky's music as a young boy in St Petersburg's Maryinsky Theatre (Stravinsky's father actually knew Tchaikovsky and, according to Stravinsky's *Expositions*, was even one of the coffin-bearers at the funeral⁴). A life-long love affair began there and, aside from *The fairy's kiss* itself, Stravinsky dedicated *Mavra* to Tchaikovsky (along with Pushkin and Glinka); made two sets of arrangements of music from *Sleeping Beauty* (the only straight ones of his life); and was a regular conductor of his works. Tchaikovsky is the only composer not to fall foul of Stravinsky's regular habit of aligning himself with others from the past who suited his current purpose, only to jettison them when they were no longer required.

One reason for the rapport was doubtless that the two composers had much in common, not least of which was an ambivalent attitude to their mutual Russian homeland. Tchaikovsky was always a very westernised Russian, his passion far greater for Bizet, Saint-Saens or Mozart than for his Russian nationalist contemporaries in the The Five; Stravinsky's dis-

tance from Russia, of course, had a physical reality from 1914 onwards. Both had an early ‘Russian’ phase before moving on to other interests, and yet neither composer could ever entirely forgo their Russian inheritance. It is no coincidence that both returned to Russian elements towards the very end of their creative lives – Stravinsky in the *Requiem canticles*; Tchaikovsky in the quotation of part of the ‘Russian requiem’ in his Sixth Symphony.

If there are generalised traits to the Russian character, David Brown suggests that there is one cardinal flaw...: inertia.⁵ This has, Brown suggests, affected not just the country's politics, which is characterised by ‘long periods of stasis, followed by short, sometimes very violent periods of activity’,⁶ but also its creative artists. Brown argues that this tendency manifests itself on the one hand in highly sectionalised forms, in which essentially static ‘set-pieces’ are bridged by brief outbursts of activity (for examples, Musorgsky's *Boris Godunov*; or the first part of Dostoyevsky's *The idiot*, with its frequent use of long, conversational chapters devoid of any action); and, on the other, in the characteristically Russian ‘static’ melody, in which a few pitches are used as a ‘protoshape’ to vary over and over. Such national tendencies, if we accept that they exist (as they seem to) are evidently things that both Stravinsky and Tchaikovsky had either to fight against or to embrace. In terms of form, it is obviously rather difficult here to enter into a discussion of the wide-ranging and constantly developing formal tactics which both composers employed through their long careers – safe to say that the dichotomy between enclosed, static forms (the Russian ballet composer) and more progressive, developmental forms (the western concert composer) was one in which both composers were deeply involved throughout their lives. In terms of melody, Stravinsky, of course, is well known for using a handful of pitches and rotating them in various patterns in a typically Russian manner; as for Tchaikovsky, Brown suggests (using examples from the symphonies and elsewhere) that while he did not necessarily quote folk-material very often, he did display ‘the Russian folk-composer's instinct to think in terms of foreground projections of a background outline’,⁷ where the ‘background outline’ is the protoshape of just a few pitches and the ‘foreground projections’ are the variation and elaboration of those pitches. As such, the innately Russian characteristics of both composers' melodic inventions contain areas of considerable overlap, and Stravinsky, working out some of Tchaikovsky's

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1. Paul Griffiths: *The master musicians Stravinsky* (London, 1992), p.98.

2. Eric Walter White: *Stravinsky: a critical survey* (London, 1947), p.130.

3. Quoted in Serge Lifar: *Diaghilev*.

4. Stravinsky: *Expositions and developments* (London, 1962), p.83.

5. David Brown: *Tchaikovsky*, vol.4 (London, 1986/1991), p.421.

6. Op. cit., p.421.

7. Op. cit., p.431.

Ex.1: from *The nutcracker* overture



8. *Expositions*, p.83.

9. Eric Walter White: *Stravinsky: catalogue of works*, p.310.

10. Lawrence Morton: 'Stravinsky and Tchaikovsky: Le baissé de la fée', in *Stravinsky*, ed. Paul Henry Lang (New York, 1963).

melodies in the composition of *The fairy's kiss* will have found himself using material that was very close to his own heart.

Apart from their shared country of origin, another similarity is that both composers went through a 'neoclassical' period, embracing classicism's qualities of restraint and elegance. Stravinsky was particularly fond of Tchaikovsky's so-called neoclassical works, especially the Serenade, and although the aesthetic approach each composer had to their classical predecessors was not entirely compatible, it is not difficult to see the influence of the Serenade's cool, clear string orchestra on the composer of *Apollo* or the Concerto in D.

The common ground of neoclassicism reflects a more general common interest in light, fresh scoring. Tchaikovsky did, of course, enjoy a very un-Stravinskian, richly romantic texture (the Serenade itself, for example, is close in spirit to Schumann in its opening movement), but it was what Stravinsky called Tchaikovsky's 'elegance... and his sense of humour'⁸ which was the strongest musical link. Of particular importance among Tchaikovsky's stylistic bequests was the fast staccato passage, usually involving some note-repetition (ex.1), most often on the strings. This kind of passage is found throughout his music, particularly in the ballets, as well as, for example, in the opening movement of the Sixth Symphony, the third movement of the Fifth Symphony, or the last movement of *Souvenir de Florence*. It provides the music with a lively, sometimes care-free atmosphere, completely lacking in romantic pomposity – making it an ideal vehicle for Stravinsky's musical conceptions. For Stravinsky, at least from the time of his first neoclassical works, the fast staccato is an absolutely crucial stylistic trait, one of the key elements in defining what makes a piece peculiarly his – think of the first movement of the *Symphony in three movements*, the second movement of *Agon*, or the first movements of *Requiem canticles* and the Violin Concerto. *The fairy's kiss* emphasises the connection; the fast staccato motion in the third scene bearing a direct resemblance to the third movement of Tchaikovsky's Fifth Symphony.

There are numerous other similarities in terms of scoring. One could mention the octave-jumping flutes which accompany the waltzes in *The fairy's kiss*, *Petrouchka* and elsewhere (these are often found in Tchaikovsky's waltzes, such as the one which ends the *Sleeping Beauty* suite, but are perhaps a more general stock-in-trade of the 19th-century waltz). But Tchaikovsky sounds at his most Stravinskian when using woodwind as principal melodists – it is easy, for example, to imagine the appeal to

Stravinsky of the famous whining oboe melody in 'Le chat botte et la chatte blanche' from *Sleeping Beauty*.

Given the many and deep connections between the two composers, it is not surprising that Stravinsky took to composing *The fairy's kiss* with relish. So the story goes, he spent the summer of 1927 rummaging through Tchaikovsky's piano and vocal music and, according to Eric Walter White, 'found his appetite as a composer so quickened by contact with Chaikovsky's individual genius that he was able to continue quite fluently in the same vein where Chaikovsky had left off. The result was that although the major part of the score consists of authentic borrowings from Chaikovsky, there are also numerous passages and fragments of his own invention.'⁹ Despite White's latter phrase in support of Stravinsky, to say that the 'major part' of *The fairy's kiss* consists of 'authentic borrowings' does, I believe, somewhat under-represent Stravinsky's role in the piece. Looking through the original Tchaikovsky pieces, one quickly becomes aware just how little of them has been used. Of the fifteen or so pieces cited in *Expositions*, only a handful are ever directly quoted for more than a few bars. The most common approach is to take the first phrase of a melody, with or without the original harmony and then elaborate on it freely. As a *modus operandi* it is scarcely different from the way folk-tunes are used in *The rite of spring*, and as 'source material' we have already seen how the Tchaikovsky pieces themselves frequently displayed folk characteristics. To criticise *The fairy's kiss* therefore on grounds of 'creative humility' in its use of 'borrowed material' is, it seems to me, to similarly criticise much of Stravinsky's entire output.

Stravinsky is constantly aware of what is his to play with in the Tchaikovsky pieces and what must respectfully remain untouched. The precision with which the original fragments are extracted and then redefined within the new work can be seen if we use a few examples to compare with the other. In each case, the moment the fragment departs from Stravinsky's needs, rhythmically or melodically, he discards it and reverts to his own invention, creating what Lawrence Morton calls 'Stravinsky's rhomboids, scalenes, trapeziums, or trapezoids' out of 'Chaikovsky's inevitable squares'.¹⁰ Ex.2a shows a few bars from Tchaikovsky's op.40 no.7. As with so many of his piano pieces, the rhythm is extremely four-square and the form is built, in the Russian manner, by incessantly repeating, with variation, a single theme. The one rhythmic ambiguity is the three-quarter falling pattern (labelled x) in the right hand overlapping the two in the left. Stravinsky seizes this

Ex.2a: Tchaikovsky: op.40 no.7

Ex.2b: *The fairy's kiss*, fig.71

tiny element and twists it every way he can (ex.2b). He highlights the three-quaver pattern by accompanying the original tune with a three-quaver waltz (later this will itself distort into a four-quaver waltz) and plays the tune the first time with only one three-quaver pattern. In effect, the original is ripped apart and stuck back together in slightly the wrong position. The four-bar tune may be original Tchaikovsky, but the effect is one-hundred percent Stravinsky.

The next example (ex.3) is taken from Tchaikovsky's 'Natha-Valse' op.51 no.4. The delightful simplicity of this tune makes it perfect for the kind of sweet naivety which Stravinsky had enjoyed since

the waltzes in *Petrouchka*. In this case, however, it is not naive enough. The modulation to C# minor at the start of the fourth phrase of the Tchaikovsky roots it firmly in the Austro-German tradition. Like the *Petrouchka* waltzes, it is the organ-grinder tradition that Stravinsky would rather invoke here and he therefore rewrites the end of the tune with a simple answering phrase, whilst at the same time, with typical Stravinskian sorcery, gently slipping the gears below by using the 'wrong' bass notes.

As by now you may have gathered, I believe that in the majority of *The fairy's kiss* music, the interaction between Tchaikovsky and Stravinsky is entirely

Ex.3: Tchaikovsky: 'Natha-Valse' op,51 no.4/Stravinsky: *The fairy's kiss*. fig.78

The first system of the musical score shows the piano accompaniment for the first two measures of Tchaikovsky's 'Natha-Valse'. The right hand plays chords and single notes, while the left hand provides a steady bass line with quarter notes.

The second system continues the piano accompaniment for the next two measures of Tchaikovsky's 'Natha-Valse', maintaining the same rhythmic and harmonic structure.

Tchaikovsky's continuation

The third system shows Stravinsky's continuation of Tchaikovsky's piece. The right hand features more complex rhythmic patterns and melodic lines, while the left hand continues with a similar bass line.

Stravinsky's continuation (transposed)

The fourth system shows Stravinsky's continuation of Tchaikovsky's piece, transposed. The right hand continues with complex rhythmic patterns, and the left hand provides a bass line.

Ex.4: Tchaikovsky: 'Humoreske' op.10 no.2//Stravinsky: *The fairy's kiss*. fig.56

The first system of the musical score shows the piano accompaniment for the first two measures of Tchaikovsky's 'Humoreske'. The right hand plays chords and single notes, while the left hand provides a steady bass line with quarter notes.

The Fairy's Kiss, fig.56

The second system shows the orchestration for 'The Fairy's Kiss'. The top staff is for horns, the middle staff is for cello pizzicato and bassoon, and the bottom staff is for bass pizzicato and bassoon. A dynamic marking of *sfz* is present.

satisfactory. As we have seen, the areas of overlap between the two, in terms both of technique and style were considerable – enough to allow Stravinsky to skip back and forward between his own music and that of his muse without a hint of any jolt. This said, I should emphasise again that the vast majority of material is Stravinsky's own. Melodies and fragments from the Tchaikovsky pieces are almost always just a starting point. If they are not being toyed with, as in the above examples, their orchestration and registration, like that in *Pulcinella*, is almost always very clearly Stravinsky's own (we will come to the exceptions in a moment). Ex.4 shows a few bars from near the beginning of scene 2, alongside Tchaikovsky's original. The four horns are made to sound distinctly comical, like proud chickens clucking away. Together with the insistent folk-like pizzicatos in the bass, it is a texture that Tchaikovsky could never have dreamed of. But in an elegant paradox, it is not the harmony here which causes the 'Stravinsky sound' – if anything the original Tchaikovsky is more Stravinskian, its emphasised down-beat E giving the piece a feeling of polytonality. Stravinsky has curiously reharmonised the right hand a fourth lower, so that it all fits comfortably within D major.

Comparing these two examples, one is aware, in a way that pertains to the whole of *The fairy's kiss*, how the two composers are at once so similar and yet so distant. In no less profound a way he achieved in *Pulcinella*, which deals happily with the much more distant music of Pergolesi, Stravinsky has managed once again to uproot our conception of style and unity. The process is made all the more shocking here because compatible traits between the two composers are allowed to sit side by side with traits which are clearly incompatible. As such the situation is somewhat more complex than *Pulcinella*, which deals purely with the gulf between the 'source' and the 'sorcerer'. In *The fairy's kiss* that gulf is far narrower and at some points can be crossed in a single bound. In choosing to explore ground so close to home Stravinsky, at least in part, offers us a deconstruction of himself as well as of Tchaikovsky, revealing in the process those aspects ('elegance... humour') which most fired his own soul. Whilst for some

composers, such revelation would no doubt be cause for much pain and angst, for Stravinsky the resulting music is of such infectious playfulness that it can hardly fail to invigorate.

If there are some passages in which the relationship between the two composers becomes unsettling, these are surely the ones in which texture, style and orchestration are all simultaneously allowed to become more overtly romantic. It was to this latter tradition, as Paul Griffiths said, that Stravinsky's 'whole output... seemed to offer a set of contraries',¹¹ and therefore to hear such passages in *The fairy's kiss* sounds so entirely un-Stravinskian as to ruin the delicate balance existing between the two composers in the rest of the piece. Particularly unsatisfactory are a few areas in which a clear and unchanging 'melody and accompaniment' texture is allowed to reign for too long. These include the repeated horn solo at fig.110, the plain, waltz-like texture of the 'Pas de deux' at fig.158, and the long concluding section from fig.213 onwards, which has over fifty bars of uninterrupted tremolo (accompanying a simple tune), followed by a further fifty of a repeating downward arpeggio. Such moments sound plain and unoriginal and are so lacking in character as to be truly exceptional in Stravinsky's output. Whilst the latter two sections were the only two which Diaghilev apparently liked (his distaste, it seems, was more to do with Stravinsky's choice of ballet company than the music itself), these moments in *The fairy's kiss* are doubtless the cause of its low reputation. It is no coincidence that Stravinsky wiped them out, without exception, for the concert version and the resulting piece, renamed *Divertimento*, is, I think, one of the highlights of Stravinsky's output, second only to *Petrouchka* and *The rite of spring*, fully worthy of its place alongside *Pulcinella*, *The soldier's tale*, or *Symphony in three movements*. The full version of *The fairy's kiss*, which is being given a rare performance this month at the Proms, contains all the *Divertimento's* wonderful music and more, with just a few more humble moments to remind us that Stravinsky was, after all, a member of our species. The work's detractors over the years have robbed us of a little piece of magic.

11. Griffiths, p.193.

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Oliver Knussen conducts the BBC Symphony Orchestra in *The fairy's kiss* during Prom 29, which begins at 6.30 in the Royal Albert Hall on 11 August.

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