

· SIXTH SYMPHONY ·

7 March 1894 (III)

For all that, the opening concert of the season on Wednesday last was a great success, thanks to Tchaikowsky's last symphony, which was very interesting, and far too novel and difficult to leave the band any middle course between playing it well and not playing it at all. Tchaikowsky had a thoroughly Byronic power of being tragic, momentous, romantic about nothing at all. Like Childe Harold, who was more tragic when there was nothing whatever the matter with him than an ordinary Englishman is when he is going to be executed, Tchaikowsky could set the fateful drum rolling and make the trombones utter the sepulchral voice of destiny without any conceivable provocation.

This last symphony of his is a veritable Castle of Otranto, with no real depth of mood anywhere in it, but full of tragic and supernatural episodes which, though unmotivated, and produced by a glaringly obvious machinery, are nevertheless impressive and entertaining. There are, besides, abundant passages of romance and revelry, with the usual Tchaikowskian allowance of orchestral effects which are so purely that and nothing else that they have absolutely no sense if played on a pianoforte. Take, for instance, the basso ostinato at the end of the first movement, and the rushing scale passages for strings and wind in the march. These are, from the symphonic point of view, simple humbug. There is no separate slow movement, its place being taken by the second subject of the opening allegro, which appears as an andante, fully developed as such. The innovation is so successful in its effect that I shall not be surprised if it be generally adopted.

By way of schetzo, there is a charming movement in five-four time, which brought the house down. Most musicians, if asked to note it by ear off-hand, would have written the first eight bars of five-four time as twenty bars of two-four, taking the second note as the beginning of the first bar, and dividing the theme into strains of five bars instead of the usual four. No doubt such a scoring would produce a number of accents which Tchaikowsky did not intend; but our sense of this five-in-a-bar rhythm is still so undeveloped that as I listened I found myself repeatedly breaking the movement into two-four and three-four bars; and, what is more, the band was doing

exactly the same thing. After this five-four movement comes a very elaborate and brilliant march, with, it must be confessed, a good deal of nonsense about it. The finale brings us back to the Castle of Otranto, and ends in a sufficiently melancholy manner to enable us critics (Tchaikowsky having opportunely died) to give our "swan song" stereo an airing.