

THE CAUSE OF P. I. TCHAIKOVSKY'S (1840 – 1893) DEATH: CHOLERA, SUICIDE, OR BOTH?

UZROK SMRTI P. I. ČAJKOVSKOG (1840.–1893.): KOLERA, SAMOUBOJSTVO ILI OBOJE?

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SUMMARY

The death of P. I. Tchaikovsky (1840 – 1893) excites imagination even today. According to the »official scenario«, Tchaikovsky had suffered from abdominal colic before being infected with cholera. On 2 November 1893, he drank a glass of unboiled water. A few hours later, he had diarrhoea and started vomiting. The following day anuria occurred. He lost consciousness and died on 6 November (or on 25 Oktober according to the Russian Julian calendar). Soon after composer's death, rumors of forced suicide began to circulate. Based on the opinion of the musicologist Alexandra Orlova, the main reason for the composer's tragic fate lies in his homosexual inclination. The author of this article, after examining various sources and arguments, concludes that P. I. Tchaikovsky died of cholera.

Key words: History of medicine 19th century, pathography, cause of death, musicians, P. I. Tchaikovsky, Russia.

PROLOGUE

In symphonic music, the composer's premonition of death is presented in a most emotive manner in the Black Mass by W. A. Mozart and G. Verdi (which may be expected taking into account the text: *Requiem aeternum dona eis ...*), in the introduction to R. Wagner's opera Tristan and Isolde and in the last movement of G. Mahler's Ninth Symphony. When listening to Symphony No. 6 by Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky, called

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Oil portrait of the composer
P. I. Tchaikovsky's
(1840 – 1893),
painted by N. D. Kuznecov
in 1883.

*N. D. Kuznjecov: Portret P. I.
Čajkovskog (1840.–1893.),
ulje na platnu, 1883.*



‘Pathetic’, which ends chromatically in *pianissimo*, I hear the composer crying, I feel his despair when parting from life. This happened in reality, as he died only a few days after the first public performance of the symphony in Saint Petersburg.

Tchaikovsky’s fate excites imagination even today. This productive composer, who attained mastery only in the last years of his creative life, was – even by the standards of the period of ‘Romanticism’ in the art history – extremely ‘unconventional’ as regards social life and norms governing mutual relations in the Russian Empire of that time. If we are familiar with Tchaikovsky’s biography, it will be easier to assess his medical condition which was mostly the result of his mental disorders. The intestines disorder in particular may be included among psychosomatic diseases. The composer’s personal life has been well known, especially thanks to the notes taken by his younger brother Modest, who accompanied him almost all the time. Information about the dark sides of his character is however scarce, which is understandable as this would affect the family’s honour. Connoisseurs claim that in the post-revolutionary period, particularly during Stalin’s rule, there was a purge of official documents which could blacken the names of the great Russians.

SOME BIOGRAPHICAL DATA

Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky was a descendant of an impoverished family of a clerk. The composer himself had financial difficulties throughout his life, especially because he travelled a lot and stayed in the countries of Western Europe and, later on, due to excessive expenditure of his wife, with whom he did not live, but who nevertheless wished to live in luxury. It is said that he had never denied help to his friends or servants who asked him for money. He was educated in St. Petersburg and graduated from a 'law school' at 19. He had been staying in a boy's boarding school throughout his schooling and later also preferred to be in men's company. He soon decided to devote himself exclusively to music. He was one of the first students at the St Petersburg conservatory founded by Anton Rubinstein. He graduated as the best student and Anton Rubinstein's brother Nikolai (born in a Jewish family, but baptised later on, which was apparently a precondition to gain public recognition at that time) not only engaged him as a professor at the conservatory but also leased him an apartment for 6 years. In 1876 Rubinstein introduced Tchaikovsky to Nadezhda von Meck, a rich widow (her palace in Moscow had as much as 52 rooms), who had already been a patroness of several composers (among others of C. Debussy and A. Wieniawski to mention but two). She soon became enthusiastic about the music of the young composer. It is also said that she was attracted by the personality of the shy, lonely and charming artist. At first she paid him for the works ordered, later on he received from her a regular monthly annuity. From today's perspective, it seems almost unbelievable that in almost fifteen years of platonic friendship, they had never met. However, their correspondence was preserved and it conveys the feelings of mutual respect, trust and love. Madame von Meck refused personal contact with the artist (today, in the era of mobile phones, they would have probably talked to each other over the phone ...), to which Tchaikovsky gladly agreed.

At the age of 26, Tchaikovsky moved to Moscow. With an 'Overture-Fantasy' Romeo and Juliet – a symphonic poem – the composer achieved his first public success. As Rubinstein's subtenant in Moscow, he did not enjoy the peace his timid nature would require. Even conservatory lessons were held in the apartment. He wrote to his sister, Alexandra Davidova: "*I am slowly getting used to Moscow although I feel terribly lonely. Moscow remains a foreign city to me.*" And to his brother Anatoly: "*My nerves are on edge. Everybody here is trying to terrify me that I will soon die. I would like to escape in a far-away unpopulated land.*" He was unable to sleep, he had stomach cramps and 'high blood pressure in his head', to which he

referred as 'apoplectic symptoms'. The physician recommended 'recuperation - no composing', but to no avail. "*I am like a bear biting myself and my own compositions reverberating through my head...*" He tried to conduct his own works, but was not successful due to his shyness and lack of self-confidence. It is said that fortunately, the orchestra knew the score well and did not follow the conductor's instructions ... After this performance in the spring of 1867, he had not directed an orchestra for more than a decade. However, his Symphony No. 1 saw a great success under his conductorship with the audience in Moscow in contrast to the first performance in Saint Petersburg. He was deeply affected by Rubinstein's sharp criticism of his piano Concerto in B minor which later became famous. The critique implied that the work was bad, impossible to perform and therefore needed radical reworking. A few years later, Tchaikovsky described in a letter his irritation after such a sharp criticism: "*I am not a stupid boy who has just started to compose and I do not need such hostile instructions*". The composer told Rubinstein that he would not alter a single note in the score. The work was first dedicated to Nikolai Rubinstein, but after his severe criticism, the composer dedicated this concerto to Hans von Bülow, German pianist and conductor, who admired Tchaikovsky and promoted his music in the West. The irony of the fate is that fifteen years later, Tchaikovsky thoroughly reworked the piano concerto and pianist Rubinstein changed his mind and often played this concerto on world stages.

CORRESPONDENCE BETWEEN NADEZHDA VON MECK AND P. I. TCHAIKOVSKY

Madame von Meck was an erudite and a successful businesswoman, mother of 12 children, a rich factory owner's widow in whose possession was the only private railway between Moscow and the Ural Mountains. After her husband's death, she found the sense of life in the patronage of young composers. She was at the helm of a large company and managed property in the countryside, but refused to have contacts with strangers. In one of her letters addressed to P. I. Tchaikovsky she reflects: "*... I may affirm that I am shyer than you because I broke off contacts with the world to such an extent that I never speak to anyone, be it in hotels or shops, as if I would not understand their language.*" In the family life, she was a despot; she took decisions on behalf of her adult children. Madame von Meck yearned for love, but not physical one: the love that she found in P.I. Tchaikovsky and his music. Here is a quote of an abbreviated extract from



Nadezhda Filaretovna von Meck
(1831-1894).

Nadežda Filaretovna von Meck
(1831.–1894.)

her first letter to the composer when he agreed to take into account her wishes in composing a new piece of music (it is not known what her wishes were). *“Nadezhda Filaretovna to Pyotr Ilyich. Moscow, 30 December 1876. Most respected Pyotr Ilyich, Thank you so much for having complied with my wish so quickly. It is unnecessary to point out what enthusiasm your music arouses in me; life becomes easier and more pleasant.”* And Tchaikovsky replied immediately: *“Allow me to thank you for more than a generous award for such a tiny work. Why were you embarrassed to share your thoughts with me? I too, have most warm feelings for you.”*

Madame von Meck expressed her relationship to P. I. Tchaikovsky in one of her following letters with the words: *“For me a musician is the best human being. I am looking for opportunities to read about your life as much as possible so that you would become even dearer to me. I fear acquaintance. I prefer to think of you from a distance, to hear you in your music.”*

It is well known that Tchaikovsky was rather irresponsible as regards his own financial affairs. The situation aggravated in relation to his marriage in the spring of 1877. He asked Madame von Meck for an advance payment of 3000 roubles on the ordered compositions (which was more

than his annual income) and she immediately approved. P. I. Tchaikovsky replies: "*Most respected Nadezhda Filaretovna! Yesterday was one of the hardest days of my life. I was ashamed before you. I abused your kindness, generosity and the feeling of gentleness. I was entangled in debt which poisons life and paralyses zeal for work. I can see no way out without someone's help. I hope that my letter will not shake your belief in my honesty. I will work hard on the opera libretto on Pushkin's Eugene Onegin which is so full of poetry.*"

TCHAIKOVSKY'S RELATIONSHIP TO WOMEN AND HIS MARRIAGE

Tchaikovsky's biographies published during his lifetime and composer's correspondence with widow von Meck (these letters were first published in their integrity in three large volumes in Moscow in the years from 1934 to 1936), contain no explicit confirmation of his homosexual inclinations. However, some of his direct statements as well as those of his contemporaries undoubtedly confirm his homosexual inclinations which so strongly marked the composer's life. One has to take into account that homosexuals in the Tsarist Russia were punished as criminals by expulsion to Siberia. His marriage should deny rumours. In a letter to his brother in 1877, Tchaikovsky wrote, "*I am aware that my inclinations are the greatest and most unconquerable obstacles to happiness; I must fight my nature with all of my strength.*" It is supposed that P. I. Tchaikovsky did not have any love affairs. Biographers only mention his infatuation for a French opera singer who was on a tour in Moscow in the winter season of 1868. The composer admired above all her voice and her performance rather than her as a woman. Ten years later, at the age of 37, his student Antonina Milyukova fell in love with him, wrote passionate letters to him threatening suicide if he rejected her. Antonina Milyukova was a lovely twenty-year old girl with below average intellect. She was persuaded that all men were attracted to her. (Her letters have been preserved, whereas Tchaikovsky's letters were destroyed. She outlived Tchaikovsky by ten years, but spent the last years of her life in an insane asylum.) He entrusted his doubts and despair only to his faithful patroness, Madame von Meck: "*To my great surprise, I became engaged at the end of May. When meeting the girl at her home, I told her that I was honoured by her love, but that I did not care for her and I could only be a friend. I also described to her my character, fear of people, my nervous temperament. Despite that she answered that she wished to be my wife.*" Tchaikovsky's family was more than happy that Pyotr finally had a chance to marry, they pressed him to marry, which also happened although without festivities, even without her closest rela-

tives. He writes to his brother Anatoly: *"I will not be able to recover rapidly from such a day as was 18 June (the day of his marriage). My wife has not realised in what a terrible mental state I have found myself; she is obviously happy and content. She does not expect anything from me. Physically, she has become absolutely repulsive to me. This is by no means her fault. I can do nothing else but pretend. I wish I were dead although I love life and my work, as well as future successes."* A day after his wedding he writes to Madame von Meck: *"I am thinking of running away ... Anywhere, but how and where?"* At night he used to walk alone in the empty Moscow streets. In his despair – as he allegedly confessed to his friend – he walked into the ice-cold water of the Moscow River which however was not deep enough for getting drowned. Tchaikovsky was aware of his deep mental crisis; he knew that he should make a break with his surroundings immediately. With the help of his brother Anatoly he departed for Saint Petersburg where he had a nervous breakdown. After a one-week recuperation period, he set out for Berlin and from there to Geneva Lake. When he was abroad, he soon realised that he had no money and asked Nadezhda von Meck for help. She immediately transferred him a considerable sum of money and again approved an annual monthly annuity not only to him but also to his brother Modest who wasted money irresponsibly. Tchaikovsky immediately replied to his generous saviour: *"Nadezhda Filaretovna, every note I write is dedicated to you. You make me recall vividly what has enabled me to continue exercising the artistic profession. May my music speak to you and tell you that I love you with all my heart and soul."*

TCHAIKOVSKY'S MONTHS ABROAD

After having suffered from a nervous breakdown in Saint Petersburg, where he escaped from Moscow to free himself from his wife's presence, he travelled abroad with his brother Anatoly. They did neither plan where they would be going nor how long they would stay abroad. Via Berlin, they went to a small town of Clarens on the shore of Geneva Lake where many wealthy Russians resided, including political exiles. When he was stuck in a hotel without money (we can imagine the consequences this would have for the composer) he received another money transfer from Nadezhda von Meck. In November 1877 he again suffered from digestive disorder; he was recommended a well-known Paris physician with whom he was not satisfied. *"He let me wait for a very long time. As soon as I started talking of my disease, he interrupted me saying that he already knew all that. He prescribed a medicine and concluded the interview by*

explaining that my disease was incurable, but that I would be able to live with it," writes Tchaikovsky to Madame von Meck. He left Switzerland and went to Italy, first to Florence and then to Rome, but in his letters, he regrets that he has left Clarens so soon. His brother Anatoly returned to Moscow and brought the first act of the opera Eugene Onegin with him, while Peter Ilyich travelled to Venice alone. When he received a new money transfer from Madame von Meck, he regained the will to compose. "I am working with enthusiasm on our new symphony (the fourth)," he informs her. "It seems to me that this will be the best of all my works."

In order not to feel lonely, he called his servant from Russia and, later on, his brother Modest joined him. He was desperately home-sick, a feeling that he expressed in his next letter to Nadezhda: "The Russian landscape, walks through fields and woods aroused such feelings in me that I sometimes used to throw myself on the ground out of my love for nature." He did not explain in his letters why he did not return to Russia; he spoke neither of his aversion against his wife nor of his homosexual inclinations. The symphony was finished a week after and Tchaikovsky then sent it to Moscow where it was first performed on 22 February 1878 under Nikolai Rubinstein's baton. It was the fate of all most important Tchaikovsky's compositions that they did not meet with approval when first performed. Let us recall that Rubinstein refused to play his piano concerto in B minor. The same holds true for his renowned violin concerto (the only one he composed) as violinists refused to play it because they believed that it was technically unplayable. When this concerto was performed in Vienna in December 1881, a loud protest was heard from the audience: a well known music critic Eduard Hanslick (opponent of J. Brahms) was very sharp when he wrote that the violin "is rent asunder, beaten black and blue" that the music plunges us into deplorable merriment of a Russian holiday carousal and that it stinks to the ear.

TCHAIKOVSKY'S RETURN TO RUSSIA

After a six-month stay abroad, the composer decided to return to his homeland. Although a severe depression may be inferred from his letters to Madame von Meck, the period of his stay in Switzerland and Italy was very productive; he finished his Symphony No. 4, concerto for violin and orchestra, opera Eugene Onegin and many other compositions for chamber ensembles, piano and lieder. Madame von Meck kept him informed of the success of his works in Russia; his official divorce was being arranged; he was asked to take on professorship at the Moscow Conservatory. At

first he did not decide to settle down in Moscow; he preferred to live in the estates of his relatives and Madame von Meck. Correspondence with Nadezhda von Meck became increasingly frequent; they exchanged extensive letters almost daily. In their letters, they talked about family matters with ease since Madame von Meck had 12 children and Tchaikovsky had several brothers and sisters. The topic of their letters also includes social life in Moscow and Saint Petersburg and gossip about musicians. Madame von Meck explained in detail her own attitude towards music and individual composers and asked Pyotr Ilyich to give his opinion. The most interesting and important content of these letters is the composer's explanation of the principles he takes into account when composing, an assessment of his own works and presentation of future plans. He says in one of his letters: *"An artist leads a double life: that common to mankind and that of an artist. For composition, the most important condition is the possibility of separating oneself from the cares of the first of these two lives. For an artist, there is nothing worse than to give way to laziness."* And continues: *"I write my sketches on the first piece of paper that comes to hand. A melody may never appear in my head without its harmony. Sketching is very pleasant, absorbing and, at times affording utterly indescribable delights, yet at the same time is accompanied by anxiety, by a certain nervous excitement. The sketch must then be critically scrutinized, amended, supplemented and, in particular, abridged in the light of structural requirements. I am glad to see that I am gradually advancing along the path to perfection."* A few weeks later, he wrote to Madame von Meck from Saint Petersburg where he visited his brother Hippolyte who was ill: *"Newspapers often write about me, also abroad, I would like to run away, to hide myself. My life resembles that of a criminal. You understand me better than anyone else, my beloved and gentle friend..."*

P. I. Tchaikovsky had been for several years dissatisfied with teaching theoretical subjects at the Moscow Conservatory; weekly, he had over 20 hours of lectures in addition to practical lessons, which limited his freedom. He however felt responsible towards his students and, in particular, towards Nikolai Rubinstein who had a strong influence on the composer. Encouraged by the support of Madame von Meck, he resigned in November 1878. He also refused the invitation to become professor at the Saint Petersburg Conservatory. Madame von Meck wished to give him at his disposal her palace in Moscow together with servants at the time when she was abroad for several weeks. He wrote to his patroness and admirer that when visiting the house, he was particularly delighted

by two concerto pianos: a Bechstein and a Steinway. He did however not accept her offer. He rather decided to go to her sister's estate in the south of Ukraine. Widow von Meck then conceived a new plan to make Tchaikovsky move near her. At that time she resided in a manor in Florence, which she had hired for several months. She took with her not only servants, coachmen and cooks, but also a teacher for her children who accompanied her. She hired an apartment in the city for Pyotr Ilyich. "Come, my dear," she asked him in a letter. Tchaikovsky agreed answering: "Every moment of my life my heart is full of love and gratitude for you. I would go not only to Florence, but anywhere you wish, even to the very ends of the earth..." Within the three weeks in Florence, they had never met in person although Madame von Meck often went for a walk under his window and Pyotr Ilyich used to walk in the vicinity of the manor house. She was very attentive: there were fresh flowers in his apartment every day, she ordered special Turkish cigarettes for him, which it was impossible to buy in Italy, he had his own cook, she sent him Russian newspapers. They could have met in the theatre, but Madame von Meck preferred to stay in the rear of her box. They exchanged letters almost every day. The messenger was Tchaikovsky's servant who accompanied him to Italy.

PSYCHOSOMATIC DISORDERS AND ORGANIC DISEASES FROM WHICH TCHAIKOVSKY HAS BEEN SUFFERING EVER SINCE HIS YOUTH

One may infer from letters addressed mainly to Madame von Meck and Tchaikovsky's brothers Modest and Anatoly that his nature was split: he was a very kind man, well-received in society, modest despite his fame and he has never been aggressive in public. Although he showed optimism in impersonal social contacts, he was in reality uncertain: he was shy by nature, subject to depression, he often cried already in the morning. He felt lonely and was afraid of life. He was obviously burdened by his unnatural attitude towards men, which he tried to hide. He was very sincere towards his brother when he wrote to him: "I am far from being a strong character – I have recently given in to my instinct. I have even fallen in love with a coach driver." In December 1889 he writes to Modest: "Any reference to the Moscow conservatory in newspapers is like the sword of Damocles. Rumours about my homosexuality would affect the entire conservatory; that is what I fear most." Perhaps for this reason he often left Russia, spent several weeks in European music centres and, in particular, spas in France, Switzerland and Italy. He had never been really pleased when he decided to travel abroad because he was always desperately homesick. His

brother Modest wrote: *"This was not the pleasure of travelling; the secret power that led him here and there was a profound, inexplicable restlessness, a gloomy mood that was seeking any kind of oblivion everywhere."*

His passion for smoking strong Turkish cigars in particular and drinking alcoholic drinks has not been mentioned so far. P.I. Tchaikovsky admitted openly: *"I am a man suffering from nerves; therefore, I cannot live without the poison of alcohol. I am drunk every evening: I feel great in the first stage of my drunkenness. I have not noticed that this would affect my health."* This was the cause of some of his physical problems, such as headache, loss of appetite, abdominal troubles due to his affected stomach, liver and pancreas which may all be ascribed to his dependence on alcohol. It may be inferred that he had ulcer because cognac helped him when he was in pain and he felt better if he ate something. The cause of pain and weakness of limbs may be alcoholic polyneuritis. The composer's medical condition immediately after his marriage was described when he sought refuge in Saint Petersburg where he had a nervous breakdown (delirium). His brother Modest who accompanied him states that he was in 'a coma' in the hotel room, he regained consciousness only two days after his arrival. His personal physician prescribed him Epsom salts and Ricinus Oil in case of severe disorder and advised the change of environment. The medical science in Russia at the end of the 19th century could obviously not help him.

P. I. TCHAIKOVSKY'S ASSESSMENT OF THE MUSIC OF HIS CONTEMPORARIES

It is surprising that in biographies of well-known composers little is said about the opinion they had of their colleague composers, particularly in mature age. Tchaikovsky however was an exception in this respect. In his letter to Nadezhda von Meck he could freely express his opinion without fearing resentment. We may be able to understand better the essence of his creation through statements explaining how he experienced the music of his contemporaries. Let me mention here some of his most important thoughts in this context. It should be underlined that as a composer, P.I. Tchaikovsky was 'conservative'; he did not contribute to the development of new substance and forms, he was a late romantic, very efficient in discovering new, beautiful melodies which he was able to shape in a characteristic harmonic structure, particularly in his last orchestral works. He was a professor of composition at a conservatory; therefore he had a rather patronizing attitude to his Russian contempo-

aries to whom music was not the main profession. There is a lack of information about his attitude to the music created by foreign contemporaries; there is no direct testimony either, although one would expect it from his students at the conservatory. As a renowned and popular professor he explained to them the most characteristic cases from music history. He had a most critical attitude towards R. Wagner as artificial German monumentalism and theatricality were strange and repulsive to his Slavic soul. He writes to Nadezhda von Meck: *“What a Don Quixote Wagner is. He is a symphonist by nature, but in his last four operas he lets music slip quite out of sight. How they are wearisome.”* It is interesting that P.I. Tchaikovsky could not endure the music of J. Brahms: in his opinion the composer is dark and cold wishing to sound profound, which, however, he does not manage to do: he interrupts melody even before he has developed it. His critical attitude to his contemporaries from St. Petersburg (Balakirev, Borodin, Rimsky-Korsakov, Musorgsky, Cui and Glinka senior) is also surprising. He called them amateurs. He resented their underestimation of compulsory music schooling and musician’s profession. Tchaikovsky was much more appreciative of the French music: he commends the ballet Sylvia by Delibes (he thinks that it is much better than his Swan Lake), he was enthusiastic about Bizet’s opera Carmen. Although P.I. Tchaikovsky was shy and depressive by nature, he believed that his music equalled the works of the leading West European composers. He was very offended if he felt that he was underestimated because he was Russian. He writes to Nadezhda von Meck: *“Are you aware that they speak to Russian artists in a patronizing tone? I was compelled to visit F. Liszt. He was very respectful towards me (to such an extent that it made me feel sick), but he kept on smiling to me which made me wonder about his attitude towards me. I will not flatter these gentlemen.”*

In April 1879 P.I. Tchaikovsky was in Moscow again to attend the premiere of Eugene Onegin performed by the students of the conservatory. He won recognition as composer: he received a laurel wreath from Rubinstein. Gradually Tchaikovsky’s compositions were performed more and more frequently on concert stages abroad: his Symphony No. 4 and his piano concerto in B minor were performed in Paris, Berlin, Budapest and New York. His Italian capriccio and the famous Serenade for the string orchestra aroused much enthusiasm among the public. His extensive Liturgy was rejected by high priests of the Orthodox Church and its performance in the church prohibited, which deeply affected the composer. His restless nature made him travel to European capitals again, from Vienna to Berlin, Paris, and to Italy, Rome.

TCHAIKOVSKY'S LIFE AND WORK IN THE FOLLOWING DECADE (1883-93)

Pyotr Ilyich wrote to Nadezhda von Meck: "I am craving for glory, yet I hate it at the same time." The fear that his personal life would be affected that rumours would spread about his sexual inclination to men drove him to despair. His wife did not make any statements; however, she had not yet given her consent for divorce. Obviously she no longer blackmailed him. She had numerous love affairs and gave birth to a number of children (with the surname Tchaikovsky), all of whom she gave away to children's asylum. She was confined to a mental hospital where she died in 1917.

Tchaikovsky became the most famous Russian composer. Despite growing financial difficulties (she began selling her estate), Nadezhda von Meck continued to transfer to P.I. Tchaikovsky his quarterly annuity. Tchaikovsky, then aged 42, was free from financial worries since he also received payment for the ordered works and the performance of his compositions and his most creative period began. He was obviously tired of being a guest in the estates of her sister Alexandra and Madame von Meck or to live in hotels abroad: he chose a modest house in the village



Tchaikovsky's holiday house in Klin (north of Moscow) since 1892; at present:
the composer's museum.

*Kuća za odmor P. I. Čajkovskog u Klinu (sjeverno od Moskve) od 1892.
Danas skladateljev muzej.*

of Klin, north of Moscow. He had it furnished by his servant Alexey, which is typical of Tchaikovsky. He allegedly bought only an old clock, which never functioned. (Klin is today a museum renovated after World War II during which it was burnt down). In Klin, Pyotr Ilyich was often visited by his many friends – musicians. Those who were not invited were refused entry; there was a note on the garden door: “Reception on Mondays and Fridays from 3 to 5 pm. I am not at home. Please, do not ring the bell!” When he was composing, he did not receive anyone during the day; he needed to be alone and in peace. He wrote an opera, *Mazepa*, which is no longer performed.¹ He scored a triumph when his opera *Eugene Onegin* was performed in the presence of Tsar Alexander the Third who, after the performance, invited him to his box for a long conversation. He received invitations from European capitals to conduct his own works. A. Dvořák writes to him after the performance of *Eugene Onegin* in Prague: “*Dear friend, the opera is a splendid work, full of warm feeling and poesy, a masterpiece in every detail, music a man can never forget.*” In the summer of 1888, he began working on his *Symphony No. 5* in E minor which was soon performed under the baton of the author. It had just a modest success. Tchaikovsky became uncertain again, he kept asking himself if his creativity was declining; he was sure that his new symphony was not a success. Today one could hardly find a connoisseur who would not assess his *Symphony No. 5* as one of the most beautiful scores of symphonic music and, in terms of artistic achievement, as better than his *Fourth Symphony* which Tchaikovsky dedicated to Madame von Meck ten years before. He started working on another opera the *Queen of Spades* (*Pikova dama*) which was first performed in Saint Petersburg and received acclaim. The tsarist opera in Saint Petersburg ordered a new ballet, the story of a nutcracker (a doll, Russian children’s toy, otherwise a device for cracking nuts). In Paris, Tchaikovsky discovered a new music instrument ‘celeste’ which he described as a combination of a piano and bells and he was the first to include it in the orchestra.

On the turn to the 90’s, Tchaikovsky received the most severe blow in his life. Nadezhda von Meck unexpectedly sent him a letter – the last one in almost 15 years of passionate corresponding – informing him that she had to cancel his monthly annuity due to her poor financial situation (which was not true). She also asked him to remember her from time to time. Nadezhda was allegedly suffering from tuberculosis; she became

¹ As an exception: the opera in Zagreb performed *Mazepa* with great success in 2009.

gloomy after her son's death and felt guilty for not having cared for him more. However, the available sources do not reveal why she abruptly interrupted any indirect contact with Tchaikovsky and refused to respond to the artist's desperate attempts to regain her affection. He no longer depended on her financially, but he felt betrayed, disgraced, as if he were a paid servant of a rich wife who was tired of his music. Although he was adored in his homeland and abroad he could never, in his short life still ahead, recover from this separation. He wrote to her confidant: "*Nadezhda Filaretovna was cruel towards me. I had never been so humiliated before.*"

He received an invitation from the US where he conducted his own works. He went to London where the public received him warmly. He received an honorary doctorate in Cambridge like Edward Grieg, Camille Saint Saëns, Arrigo Boit and Max Bruch.

SYMPHONY NO. 6 AND THE DEATH OF P.I. TCHAIKOVSKY

At the beginning of 1893, P.I. Tchaikovsky began to compose his last work – the Sixth Symphony. He wrote on that occasion: "*On my way to Paris, an idea for a new symphony occurred to me, this time with a programme which should remain a mystery. And when I thought of it, I burst into tears. The finale will not be a loud allegro, but an adagio lamentoso.*" He wrote to his nephew Bob Davidov (who was supposedly his lover): "*I believe this is the most sincere work I have ever composed.*" In autumn that year, he concluded orchestration and, on 28 October, a week before he died, it was performed in Saint Petersburg for the first time under the baton of the author. Similarly as Symphony No. 5, it had a modest success. His brother Modest proposed that it should be called 'Pathetic', and Tchaikovsky agreed. Only at the next performance, a few days after Tchaikovsky's death, the audience was moved, remained speechless and realised the artistic value of the symphony which became one of the most frequently performed compositions of the world music literature. The last days of P. I. Tchaikovsky's life are documented in detail, but, according to the records of his relatives, his brother Modest in particular, his physicians ascribed his death to acute illness and rejected any suspicions about any other course of events. His relatives and contemporaries as well as musicologists of the second half of the 20th century tried to disprove the assumptions that the artist had committed suicide.

According to the 'official scenario', Tchaikovsky had suffered from abdominal colic before being infected with cholera and he could not sleep

at night. He was prescribed Ricinus Oil and Epsom salts. On Thursday, 2 November, he joined others at a table and, before anyone could prevent it, he supposedly drank a glass of unboiled water although cholera had spread in the city and Pyotr Ilyich should have known the causes of this disease because his mother had died of cholera during one of the previous epidemics. A few hours later, he had diarrhoea and started vomiting. His personal physician asked his brother who was well-known in aristocratic circles to give a second opinion. He diagnosed cholera. The following day Tchaikovsky became cyanotic and anuria occurred. The physicians put him in a bath tub with hot water, which was at that time a usual procedure in kidney failure. On Sunday, he lost consciousness and when he regained it, he was whispering the name of Nadezhda von Meck and accused her of infidelity. P.I. Tchaikovsky died at 3 am on 6 November (or on 25 October according to the Russian Julian calendar).

Soon after composer's death, rumours of forced suicide began to circulate. However, they were spread in the West only following World War II by Russian political emigrants, mainly musicologists, who found refuge in the United States. The 'story' attracted the attention of novelists and scriptwriters. In the present article – which is more an essay than a historical overview with references – the efforts of Russian musicologist Alexandra Orlova should be highlighted. In 1997 she emigrated to the States to inform the world 'about the secrets of the life and death of P.I. Tchaikovsky'. In her opinion, the main reason for the composer's tragic fate lies in his homosexual inclination. In order to avoid a scandal which would disgrace the good name of his colleagues from the St. Petersburg law school, they forced him to commit suicide. The story about cholera was allegedly invented by his brother Modest and his personal physicians to conceal the truth. Alexandra Orlova lent her ear to rumours that were more than a century old. None of these assumptions has been historically confirmed, they are all based on oral testimony, asserts in 1977 Russian historian and Tchaikovsky's biographer Alexander Poznansky, a Soviet emigrant as well. As an associate of the Yale University in the United States, he published numerous articles and books in which he refers to the findings of A. Orlova as unhistorical and non-scientific. Despite that, I will present them in this article in the same manner as the author, both substantively and chronologically.

In the Tsarist Russia and the Soviet Union, homosexuality was a taboo which should not be researched and written about. The letters in which Tchaikovsky speaks about his erotic drive and some of his sexual relation-

ships were only recently published in Moscow (1995). In the Soviet Union, it was officially prohibited to write about anything that would tarnish composer's reputation although the prevailing attitude was that he had been a monarchist and an advocate of 'bourgeois melancholy'.

The circumstances surrounding the death of famous personalities excite imagination among people and create legends. Let us recall the story of alleged Salieri's hatred for Mozart – he was even blamed for Mozart's death. One may imagine what attention the unconventional life of their leading composer attracted in the upper social circles in the capital of the Tsarist Russia, Saint Petersburg, and in Moscow, particularly his homosexual inclinations and his romantic relationship with one of the wealthiest women in the Empire. This gave rise to speculations about the cause of Tchaikovsky's death, opposing the official position that he had died of cholera and asserting that he was forced to commit suicide.

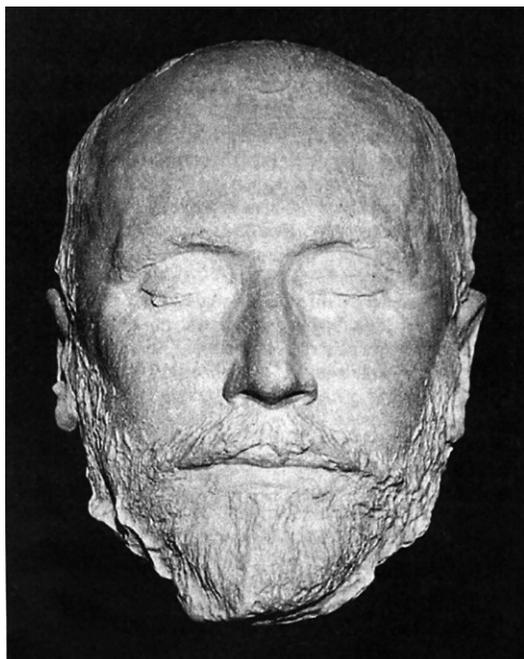
I am neither a historian nor a musicologist who would carry out his own research and come closer to truth. Let me present these opposing opinions to readers of ISIS journal, edited monthly, by Medical Chamber of Slovenia. Such opinions have in recent years been published even in serious musicological journals. There is no doubt that Tchaikovsky had homosexual inclinations. There had never been a woman in his sexual life. His marriage was fictitious and due to the pressure of his family to remove any doubt. On the day of his marriage, he attempted to commit suicide. In a letter to his friend he admitted that his wife had become repulsive to him. Since the time he was in a boarding school, he had always been in men's company only. He devoted special attention to some of his students with whom he even travelled abroad. He was particularly attached to his nephew Vladimir Davidov who was his lover. It has been recently discovered in secret archives of the Tsarist Russia that he had a sexual intercourse with a 14-year old boy, a relative of a famous aristocrat who allegedly reported this to the tsar. Tchaikovsky's conviction could result in his expulsion to Siberia and confiscation of all his property. There is no written evidence that a court of honour composed of his colleagues from the law school met and proposed that he should commit suicide in order to preserve his own honour as well as that of his family. This is supposed to have happened a day before the official report stating that he 'drank a glass of unboiled water'. Those who oppose this official explanation maintain that Tchaikovsky committed suicide by arsenic poisoning. The clinical symptoms in arsenic poisoning resemble those the composer had in the last days of his life: severe abdominal cramps, vomit-

ing, thirst, diarrhoea, muscle pain, nausea, the loss of consciousness, kidney failure.

Let me mention another interesting opinion that homosexuality was not necessarily a dangerous burden for Tchaikovsky; in the 19th century Tsarist Russia legislation prohibited homosexuality. However, this did not apply to members of the upper classes; certain ministers and counsellors to the Tsar were homosexuals but had never been sued. The brother of Tsar Alexander the Third even founded a homosexual club in Saint Petersburg. Tchaikovsky's reputation in Russia and abroad was so high that he would never be officially charged in public.

There are other reasons speaking against the composer's suicide: his fear of death, which he often expressed in his letters. It was forbidden to speak about funerals, coffins and tombs in his presence. Therefore, it is highly improbable that such a person would commit suicide. According to his friends, Tchaikovsky's physical condition in the months before his death was very good. He had even gained weight. The composer had ambitious plans for a new opera, he was trying to find a suitable scenario. Would a composer who planned to commit suicide make arrangements for host performances at home and abroad, in London, Amsterdam and in German music centres?

Historian Orlova developed her theory of conspiracy against Tchaikovsky on the basis of statements by 'third persons' who allegedly received 'confidential information' from their relatives about the last days of composer's life. If his physician (V. B. Bertenson), shortly before he died in 1933, told musicologist Georgi Orlov (Alexandra's husband) that Tchaikovsky poisoned himself, this may also mean that the poison was water. Doubts are even more justified because it is almost unbelievable that 40 years after Tchaikovsky's death, a famous physician would admit, that he had lied. Orlova heard the story about conspiracy from one of her acquaintances who finished the Saint Petersburg law school in 1913 and the latter from the widow of Nikolay Borisovich Jakobi, a lawyer who should have participated in Tchaikovsky's meeting with his former colleagues who forced him to commit suicide to redeem 'honour'. It should be underlined that in the last years of the Russian Empire a suicidal psychosis was present in society, which contributed to rumours about Tchaikovsky's death. Several processes of that time had wide repercussions, e.g. the process against Oscar Wilde in England and forced suicide of industrialist Friedrich Krupp – they were both homosexuals. The mystery in Orlova's story is the poison, reportedly arsenic: who would have



The composer's posthumous mask.

Skladateljeva posmrtna maska

handed it over to Tchaikovsky? The poisoning would be considered as murder from the legal point of view. It is impossible that this would be his physicians, brothers Vasily and Lev Bertenson, both well-known in Saint Petersburg – the latter was also famous in the Tsarist Court – and younger assistants Dr A. L. Zander and Dr N. N. Mamonov who were present at the patient's bedside, or his brother Modest. Some toxicologists consider that the clinical course of composer's four-day illness is not indicative of poisoning with arsenic.

Cholera appears in the form of an epidemic through centuries in different parts of the world as a result of poor hygienic conditions due to contaminated drinking water. It is not transmitted by personal contact. It was concluded at an international conference in Dresden in the spring of 1893 that quarantine is not a suitable measure against this disease. In Saint Petersburg several hundreds of people contracted this disease and died of it at the time of composer's illness, but most of them in poor quarters of the city without water supply and sewage systems. The statistics of this epidemic indicate that more than half of those infected survived. (Composer and physician and chemist A. Borodin contracted cholera but recovered).

Modest Tchaikovsky who most closely followed the course of the disease in writing was stung with remorse since he did not send for a doctor at the first signs of the disease and the following 24 hours because he was occupied with the performance of his own theatre play. The physician, whom he called later, Lev Bertenson, established that Tchaikovsky had contracted a severe form of cholera. Alexandra Orlova states, in support of the opinion that the physicians tried to conceal poisoning by diagnosing cholera, that the reports on Tchaikovsky's condition contain uncoordinated facts. In comparing these data there are no reasons to corroborate Orlova's suspicion of the theory of conspiracy. Her most convincing argument is the instructions of the national sanitary authorities in the Tsarist Russia of 1892 on how to proceed in cholera cases: "The body must be wrapped in a sheet impregnated with **disinfectant** and removed from the scene of death immediately in a closed coffin in order to limit funeral ceremonies which could attract many people. If the patient is treated at home, his family should leave the house." It is true that these instructions were no longer contained in the decree issued the following year. If they still applied there would be protests by the public wishing to pay their last respects to the composer. In fact, these precautions were not taken in Modest's house after Tchaikovsky's death. The composer died in the early morning hours, his corps was lying on a sofa and was put in a coffin later in the evening. Many friends had taken leave of him until then – including composer Rimsky Korsakov – and it is reported that a certain cellist 'kept kissing the deceased man's head and face'. Local newspapers reported daily on Tchaikovsky's illness since he was one of the most famous and beloved sons of Russia. After his death, a journalist wrote in one of the leading St. Petersburg newspapers: "*In view of the fact that Tchaikovsky had not died of cholera but as a result of blood poisoning, there could have been no fear of infection, therefore, his coffin had long been left open.*" It is interesting that no reaction was reported to this important fact – a journalist's opinion – either from the 'camp' advocating the 'theory of conspiracy' or from the opposite camp maintaining that A. Orlova abused and forged history. However, such a reaction would have been desirable.

CHARGES AGAINST PHYSICIANS TREATING P. I. TCHAIKOVSKY (and reflections on how journalists and our professional organisations would react in a similar situation today)

The Tsarist Russia has been presented (at least this is what we were taught at school) as a 'jail of nations', an authoritarian state where there was no rule of law and its citizens were not allowed to freely express their

opinions. I was therefore astonished by the polemics in Russian newspapers immediately following P.I. Tchaikovsky's death as to who to blame for his premature death. During the composer's four-day illness, reports about his health were published daily in the local newspaper chronicle. No one expected a tragic end. This gave rise to widespread public indignation over the death of a high-society member who contracted cholera, which was rather unusual. Suspicions about a violent death were raised. His nephew and intimate friend Yuriy Davidov wrote: "*In some newspapers insinuations were made about poisoning, suicide and other foolish ideas. These rumors even spread to medical circles. I am sure that he contracted cholera, followed by uremia which means blood poisoning due to renal failure.*" Physician Lev Bertenson had been a witness to Tchaikovsky's disease from its onset until the composer's death. He was very much exasperated and affected when he wrote: "*I must distance myself from misleading reports in certain newspapers about P.I. Tchaikovsky's disease, especially, because I did not speak in person with the majority of journalists who were writing about the disease.*" A person who knew Tchaikovsky well (A.I. Briullova) wrote in her memoirs that the public demanded 'blood'. The people asked themselves whether the doctors had done everything that contemporary medical science recommends. Did they overestimate their knowledge and did not send the patient to hospital due to their pride? A.V. Suvorin, editor-in-chief of the *Novoe Vremia* daily, was the loudest. In the editorial published a few days after Tchaikovsky's death (I quote it in a slightly abbreviated version as it could have been written in Slovenia, one hundred years later) he writes: "*I am much dissatisfied with Mr Vasiliu Bertenson not only because he could not cure Tchaikovsky, but because he abandoned him and entrusted his treatment to his brother and his assistants. I keep questioning myself: Why was the medical counsel not convened? Did he only trust in his authority? Not all has been done to save him. These words may sound horrible to Mr Bertenson, particularly because they are to no avail to the deceased, but I am writing this for those alive, to serve as a lesson to doctors in the future.*" When I am reading these accusations (at the beginning of December 2008) I have in front of me 'Delo', a leading daily newspaper in Slovenia, with almost an identical article about the death of two children in the University Medical Centre in Maribor and the University Medical Centre in Ljubljana where parents sue doctors due to negligent treatment with a tragic end. *Nil novi sub sole*. Two days after the editorial, the following was published in the same newspaper: "*We know that Dr Bertenson (Lev) submitted to the professional association (the name of which was not mentioned) an extensive report on the course of the illness and treatment of P.I.*"

Tchaikovsky attesting that he has proceeded in accordance with the medical doctrine. Corporative thinking, however, prevents doctors from condemning in newspapers or professional meetings. The truth must be brought to light and guilt must be proven. Dr Bertenson should have convened a medical counsel since he did not have the experience required for treating 'Asiatic cholera'. When he established diagnosis he should have immediately convened the physicians of the city hospital who would have told him that they were able to cure most patients". This was the opinion of another journalist.

Only after a public statement by the brother of the deceased, Modest, which was published in all newspapers in the capital of the Tsarist Russia and in which he thanked the physicians for Tchaikovsky's treatment did tension decrease for some time. Modest wrote and published a report on several pages in which he described the course of the illness for each day separately and for almost every hour until the composer's death. Nevertheless, the author of the mentioned editorial questions himself: *"What is the significance of Modest Tchaikovsky's public apology? The physicians he wishes to protect are accountable not only to the relatives of the deceased but also to the Russian society."*

Let us now return to the presumptions of A. Orlova about the conspiracy against P.I. Tchaikovsky, in which the physicians were allegedly involved and were hiding the truth. She does not object to the course of illness as was described in detail by the physicians and brother of the deceased but seeks differences in these reports, particularly the developments immediately following the composer's death, which have already been highlighted.

EPILOGUE

Composer Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky may be classified in the historical period of later Romanticism of the second half of 19th century. This classification is based not only on his music but also on his way of life and thinking, typical of the last decade of the Tsarist Russia. His homosexual inclinations and Platonic love for a rich widow with whom he corresponded for almost 15 years without ever making her acquaintance or speaking to her had made his biography famous, mysterious and attractive. The composer's dual nature: his outward appearance – that of a charming, modest and generous man – and his inner self – that of a neurotic man who often experienced mental crises, a man who had never been in love with a woman, who wished to be famous, but hated the dis-

play of glamour and feared contacts with the public, marked him for his entire life. I believe that P. I. Tchaikovsky was a happy man despite that: he enjoyed composing when he invented new melodies and harmonies which he could preserve and put on paper; he enjoyed life in the Russian countryside in close contact with nature; he had a close and loving relationship with his family, particularly with his two brothers Modest and Anatoly and his sister Alexandra; he must have been happy in the company of his nephew Davidov who faithfully accompanied him in the last years of his life; he was content when he was carousing in the company of his male friends until late night hours. In financial crises which could have affected him most, he was saved by his benefactress Madame von Meck who enabled him to travel abroad frequently, even in company, and to stay in luxury hotels in Switzerland, France and Italy for longer periods of time. On the basis of different, often contradictory, reports it may be assessed whether his homosexual inclinations really were a heavy burden for his state of mind. As a composer beginner at the age of 28 he became famous with his 'symphonic poem' *Romeo and Juliet*. With his last symphonies – the fourth, fifth and sixth – and operas *Eugene Onegin* and the *Queen of Spades*, he won acclaim not only in Russia but also in other music centres in Europe and the United States. He lectured at the Moscow Music Conservatory and had students who adored him. What a recognition and achievement for the composer!

P. I. Tchaikovsky was a very productive composer. It is true that his compositions were of different quality and did not all win public acclaim; even some of his operas are no longer performed, but *Eugene Onegin* and the *Queen of Spades* are still popular. Similarly, the last three of his symphonies are still extant. His music has certain characteristics that make it recognizable: after having heard a number of bars even a non-professional can guess who the author is. What is performed on all world stages is topmost music and even people who are not used to listening to classical music enjoy it. His best pieces are his piano concerto in B minor, his only concerto for violin and orchestra, his symphonic poems, ballet music, particularly *Swan Lake* and, of course, the last symphony in H minor called 'Pathetic'.

The stories about the 'conspiracy of silence' against P.I. Tchaikovsky, which should lead to the composer's premature death spread again in the last decades of the previous century and made his music even more popular. Films about Tchaikovsky were produced, some of them with a Hollywood-like, 'mawkish' scenario. There are no historical, scientifically

Tchaikovsky's tombstone
in Saint Petersburg
cemetery.

*Nadgrobnni spomenik
P. I. Čajkovskom na
groblju u Sankt-Peterburgu*



authoritative documents or witnesses confirming that Tchaikovsky committed suicide. The composer's life immediately prior to his death did not show any dramatic diversion from everyday routine. I, as a medical doctor, believe that he 'died of natural causes', of cholera.

Cholera pandemic in Europe was not infrequent. A severe pandemic spread from the German port of Hamburg at the end of the 19th century and claimed hundreds of thousands of victims. Upon the arrival of war prisoners during World War I, it also struck Ljubljana. It is well-known that the illness may either manifest itself by mild diarrhoea, or it may present in a fulminant form which, associated with a toxic shock, leads to death within 24 hours. The course of the illness in Tchaikovsky's case may be assessed as malign since anuria, renal failure, occurred on day 2. Let us be indulgent to his doctors, particularly the leading doctor, Lev Bertenson, in assessing the composer's medical condition and treatment and their decision not to hospitalise him. In European hospitals, intravenous infusions were administered at the end of the 19th century that can

save the life of a dehydrated patient with electrolyte imbalance². Cholera vibrio (which does not pass into blood), produces an extremely poisonous toxin which may harm the kidney and liver cells. It is therefore uncertain whether the medicine of the 21st century could help the composer to stay alive after having contracted cholera.

If we ignore the unusual life course of P.I. Tchaikovsky, his nature deviating from the socially acceptable behaviour, doubts about the causes of his sudden, premature death: his music – and his Pathetic Symphony in particular, which is in fact his requiem – ennoble the human spirit and will continue to exist regardless of historical changes in the opinion on the beautiful and the ugly in art (see Umberto Eco) as long as the human race – *homo sapiens* – lives on our planet.

P.S.

At the beginning of February 1893, P. I. Tchaikovsky came from Moscow to the capital to hold talks on the performance of his own works. Despite the fact that a cholera epidemic was raging in Saint Petersburg at that time, the population did not panic as only parts of the city inhabited by the poor were affected. The sanitary administration warned of the danger of drinking unboiled water and decreed measures to restrain the disease. It may be presumed that a large number of those who had fallen ill were treated in a hospital with the exception of wealthy citizens and aristocracy.

I have however found no information about the treatment of hospitalized cholera patients either in Tchaikovsky's biographies or musicological and medical monographs. Such findings could confirm suspicions or disburden those who were allegedly responsible for the composer's premature death. I wrote a letter to infectious diseases departments in Saint Petersburg and Moscow asking them to review the medical records of patients treated for cholera at the end of the 19th century. I have subsequently requested the Russian Medical Chamber and medical historians in Moscow and St. Petersburg to inform me whether any of their professional organisations upheld the physicians when, after the composer's death, the leading newspapers in the country incited the public against them. (Unfortunately I have received no response until the submission of the article for publication).

² P. Borisov. The Issue of Blood Transfusion in Humans throughout History. *Med razgl* 1988; 27: 51-78

There had been no etiological treatment of cholera until the discovery of antibiotics. Symptomatic medicines had no substantial effect. Life may be saved by an infusion of substitution fluids as cholera-infected patients are losing water and electrolytes through diarrhoea and vomiting; a hypovolemic shock results in a metabolism failure and in acute renal damage with anuria. *Vibrio cholera* toxins concurrently affect the vascular system and other vital organs. A toxic gastroenterocolitis threatens the life of patients even today. Let me mention that a number of severely dehydrated children and babies were admitted to the Intensive Therapy Unit of the Pediatric Surgery Department at the Ljubljana University Medical Center, in whom the failure of renal function was diagnosed; in order for them to survive some of them required peritoneal dialysis or haemodialysis. Intravenous infusion of fluids into the bloodstream was only introduced in the second half of the 19th century, particularly with the invention of a hollow needle and a metal syringe for intravenous administration of medicines by a French physician, Ch. G. Pravaz. A Berlin surgeon, A. Landerer, introduced in 1885 an intravenous isotonic 0.9 per cent sodium chloride solution in cases of substantial blood loss³. The discovery of blood groups enabled the development of transfusiology and the techniques of intravenous fluid administration. However, at the end of the 19th century, many hospitals in Europe administered fluids intravenously in severe cases of dehydration and blood loss.

There was no explanation that could satisfy my curiosity as to what were the possibilities of treatment of a severely affected cholera patient in the Tsarist Russia. I was surprised to receive a prompt response to my inquiries from Saint Petersburg and Moscow. The reply of Dr Sergei Varzin, a surgeon at the St. Petersburg State University, should be excluded from this correspondence immediately; he instructed me that I was mistaken if I believed that P.I. Tchaikovsky had died of cholera; he had allegedly committed suicide by firearms. The author of this reply had never submitted any evidence attesting to the truth of his assertions. The editor of the 'News of Infectology and Parasitology' from St. Petersburg, Dr Sergei Zaharenko, clarified that during the cholera epidemic at the end of the 19th century, patients in St. Petersburg hospital were treated with infusions, adding that he must obtain factual data. (Regrettably, he had not submitted any so far). However, he did send two booklets by e-mail dealing with the treatment of cholera at that time: the first was intended for the population

³ P. Borisov. The Issue of Blood Transfusion in Humans throughout History. *Med razgl* 1988; 27: 51-78

and was printed in 1905 while the second dating from 1918 was intended for professionals and entitled Asiatic Cholera. In the first booklet, the author explains in detail the causes of this contagious disease, describes the characteristics of the infectious agent and clinical manifestations of the disease in language understandable to the general public. He also explains in detail sanitary measures preventing the spreading of the disease, particularly with regard to contaminated water and the patient's excretions. Among treatment methods, he mentions the warming of the patient and recommends the use of an enema at the onset of the disease to eliminate the infectious agent from the body. He also recommends cognac to be administered *per os* to revive the organism. There is another important detail relevant for our considerations, i.e. that the cholera patient should be sent to hospital where he can obtain an infusion of 0.5 per cent sodium chloride solution which should dilute condensed blood. There is no mention of the survival rate of patients. In the second work intended for professionals and published after the revolution in 1918, the author provides, in the chapter 'clinical study of cholera', extensive data on the incubation period and clinical picture. The author stresses that cholera may appear in a benign form and dies out without consequences, but it may also develop into a more severe form which threatens the patient's life; he refers to it as typhoid cholera. The treatment at that time could certainly not be etiological. Different vaccines and serums were used but to no avail. The second publication also highlights the importance of intravenous infusions. Since 1908 large quantities (up to 4 litres) of sodium chloride solutions were administered concurrently with vaccination or serum therapy. The success of the treatment was erroneously attributed to the vaccine or serum.

May I conclude by an opinion (which I have already stated): professionally, as a medical doctor, I am convinced that P.I. Tchaikovsky died of cholera. Am I mistaken because the truth is so irrational?

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SAŽETAK

Smrt P. I. Čajkovskog (1840.–1893.) i dandanas uzburkuje duhove i uzbuđuje maštu mnogih koji štiju kult i djelo vrsnog skladatelja. Prema službenim izvorima, Čajkovski je, prije nego što je obolio od kolere, patio od napadaja trbušnih kolika. Dana 2. studenoga 1893. popio je čašu neprokuhane vode, što je nakon samo nekoliko sati dovelo do povraćanja i proljeva, a sljedećeg dana do anurije. Čajkovski je tada izgubio svijest te je 6. studenoga utvrđena skladateljeva smrt (prema ruskom Julijanskom kalendaru 25. listopada). Ubrzo nakon njegove smrti počele su kružiti priče o tome da je počinio samoubojstvo. Prema mišljenju muzikologinje Aleksandre Orlove, do takve tragične sudbine dovela je skladateljeva homoseksualna orijentacija.

Autor ovog članka, temeljem brojnih članaka i argumenata koje je temeljito pregledao, zaključuje da je P. I. Čajkovski podlegao koleri.

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