

# Analyzing the Technical Characteristics and Style Interpretation of Tchaikovsky's Dumka

**Nuo Han**

*Faculty of Education, Monash University, Beijing, China*  
754365608@qq.com

**Abstract:** Peter Ilyich Tchaikovsky is recognised worldwide as the greatest Russian composer in the history of modern music. Tchaikovsky is known for his realistic approach to composition, combining realistic themes with poetic music and combining folk music with romantic music, forming his own distinctive musical style. Among his many piano works, *Dumka*, which belongs to the later stages of composition, tends to be profoundly tragic and is a piano piece with a strong Russian national flavour, Tchaikovsky's contradictory psychological character being reflected in the slow and sad mood of the work and in the fast and passionate dance scenes. The composition of "*Dumka*" basically follows the musical structure of the classical Russian folk song in three parts. Tchaikovsky made it the title music while also using a large number of rhythmic patterns from Russian folk dance music, reflecting his love for his country and his people. This paper will discuss the work through an analysis of its technical features and stylistic interpretation.

**Keywords:** Tchaikovsky, *Dumka*, Technical features, Stylistic interpretation

## 1. Introduction

Tchaikovsky was a great Russian romantic composer and music educator in the 19th century, and is regarded as a great master of Russian music. His works profoundly reflect the bitterness of the Russian intelligentsia under the Tsarist dictatorship, their discontent with social reality and their deep desire for a happy and fulfilling life, and exude a strong musical influence, full of sharp dramatic conflicts and burning emotional colors. *Dumka* is an infectious, melodic and poignant piano piece from Tchaikovsky's late period of composition, very national and melancholic, and is one of the piano works that are now frequently featured in the Tchaikovsky International Piano Competition. The study of this work allows one to appreciate the musical characteristics of the romantic period combined with the national element, and to get a real sense of the complex mix of emotions that Tchaikovsky was feeling at the time.

The main reason for taking *Dumka* as an object of study in this paper is that it is a work with a typical national flavour, depicting a rich and colourful life, expressing the enthusiasm of the people and the desire for a better life. It is therefore worthwhile to study the technical characteristics and stylistic interpretation of this piece, to appreciate the musical connotations of the romantic period combined with ethnic elements, and to gain a more thorough understanding of Tchaikovsky and his music. This paper focuses on the technical features and stylistic characteristics of the *Dumka*, and in the conclusion, also offers some reflections on the inner work.

## 2. Tchaikovsky's life

Peter Ilyich Tchaikovsky was born in May 1840 in the small town of Votkinsk, Russia, into a middle-class noble family. His father was a mining engineer who played the flute and his mother was a cultivated music lover. Tchaikovsky grew up in an environment full of warmth, harmony and music, and was very musically inclined. He studied law at his father's command and graduated from the Petersburg Law School in 1859, but this did not stop him from loving music; in the autumn of 1861 he entered the Petersburg music class and began to study theoretical composition; in 1862 he left his job and entered the St Petersburg Conservatory, where he formally began to compose music; in 1866 he taught at the Moscow Conservatory, during which time he produced a large number of excellent works. In 1866 he became a teacher at the Moscow Conservatory. In 1878, Tchaikovsky left his job at the Moscow Conservatory to concentrate on composing music, and between 1878 and 1885 he performed

in Paris, Leipzig and elsewhere, and received his doctorate in music from Cambridge University in England in 1893.<sup>[1]</sup> There has never been a greater musician in Russia than Tchaikovsky, who was thoroughly international, yet thoroughly Russian, and who composed many great works throughout his life that have been much admired and have endured. His opera *The Queen of Spades*, the dance drama *Swan Lake* and the symphonic overture *1812 Overture* are all familiar works to music lovers and will still be active in major concerts today.

### **2.1 Stages of Tchaikovsky's musical composition**

Tchaikovsky lived at a time when the Russian Tsarist dictatorship was decaying and declining, when the social reality was dark and the people were depressed and uncertain. He loved his country and was concerned about the fate of the people, but in his life he felt the socio-political decay and the cruel reality that he could not see a way out of Russia. Tchaikovsky incorporated this profound reflection on his country, his people and the meaning of life into his music, which became the main tendency of his compositions. Tchaikovsky's music is purely Russian, beautiful and poignant, with a strong musical impact.

Tchaikovsky's musical output is vast, covering almost all musical genres, and the development of his compositional style and musical language can be roughly divided into three periods.

#### **2.1.1 The first period**

From the 1860s to the 1870s, can also be called Tchaikovsky's "Moscow" period. During this period Tchaikovsky devoted himself mainly to Russian folk music, using the literature prevalent at the time as the basis for his compositions and drawing inspiration from the pleasant local folk tunes, with melodies that are optimistic and cheerful and confident in the pursuit of a happy life, but also vaguely melancholic. The main masterpieces include the operas *The Water Witch* and *The Forbidden Army*, the ballet *Swan Lake*, the orchestral overture *Romeo and Juliet*; the songs *Cradle Song* and *Just a Word of Hope*, the piano sketch *The Four Seasons* and three string quartets. The *Symphony No. 2* is a cross-period work by Tchaikovsky, which already shows the stylistic characteristics of his symphonic compositions, and is known as the "Little Russian" Symphony due to the use of many Ukrainian folk songs as musical material, and the "Polish" Symphony due to the use of Polonaise in the final movement. The "Polish" Symphony. The ballet *Swan Lake*, Tchaikovsky's first ballet, was a pioneering work in the history of Russian music and a milestone in the world of ballet. This period produced a large number of popular works that have endured in the world music scene and have given Tchaikovsky a good reputation.

#### **2.1.2 The second period**

From 1876 to 1884, was the second stage of Tchaikovsky's creative life and the period of his musical maturity. This was the period when he met and formed a close friendship with Madame Merk and received strong support, both in life and in spirit, so that he left his post at the Conservatory to devote himself to composing and touring. His major works include the *Concerto in D major* for small piano, the *1812 Overture*, the opera *Matteippa*, *Yevgeny Onegin*, the piano trio *In Memory of a Great Artist*, the *Italian Rhapsody*, etc. The opera *Yevgeny Onegin* and *The Fourth Symphony*, composed between late 1877 and early 1878, are among Tchaikovsky's most important masterpieces and are also classics in the world music scene. The world's musical classics. Based on Pushkin's long poetic novel of the same name, *Yevgeny Onegin* resonates strongly with Tchaikovsky's brutal experience of longing, fantasy and disillusionment, as portrayed in his marriage to Antoni Milyukova. Tchaikovsky devoted great passion and energy to this opera, giving it a charming and poetic quality that has made it an enduringly popular work. *The Fourth Symphony*, dedicated to Madame Merk, which Tchaikovsky referred to more than once as "our symphony", is a true reflection of his innermost feelings over the past two years. It is a purely psychological, yet distinctly national opera, which laid the foundations for the stylistic transformation of Tchaikovsky's later works.

#### **2.1.3 The third period**

From 1885 to 1893, was the peak of Tchaikovsky's musical creativity, with some of his finest monumental works being produced during this period. The cruel social background, the hardships of life, the tragic emotional life, and the termination of Mrs. Meck's financial support brought great psychological trauma to Tchaikovsky, so the musical style of his works in this period tended to be more tragic, and the musical connotations were mostly reflections on the meaning of life and profound psychological portrayals. The main masterpieces include the ballets *The Nutcracker* and *The Sleeping*

*Beauty*, the operas *The Queen of Spades*, *Iolanthe* and *Symphony No. 5*, and the fantasy overture *Symphony No. 6 Pathétique* and *Manfred Symphony*, among other popular works.

Tchaikovsky's dance music is melodic, full of optimism and positivity, and combines characterful music with dance, making it a landmark in the development of dance music worldwide. The opera "*The Queen of Spades*" is also based on Pushkin's middle-grade novel of the same name, and its delicate and profound psychological descriptions and intense lyricism reflect the fundamental musical characteristics of Tchaikovsky's opera compositions. The *Symphony No. 6* is the peak of Tchaikovsky's tragic symphonies, the one that best reflects his artistic achievement and world view, and his last symphony. While it is a work of great dramatic conflict, it is also a delicate expression of Tchaikovsky's inner uncertainty and tragic fate in the darkness of his society at the time, and is distinctly autobiographical in nature. Tchaikovsky's music from the early and middle periods of his career is characterized by a strong sense of nationalism and a belief in the pursuit of happiness and light, while his later works are more dramatic and tragic.

### 3. Dumka's background to the composition

*Dumka*, also translated as "Lament", was produced in 18th-century Poland and is characterized by a mixture of passionate rapidity and long, pensive melancholy. It is a narrative lament, composed in 1886 and subtitled "Landscape of the Russian Countryside", in which Tchaikovsky brings to life the joyful and exuberant dance scenes and the heavy sadness of the Russian nation. *Dumka* was written at a time when Tchaikovsky was at the height of his creative powers, when the Russian political system was dark and corrupt and the people were suffering and oppressed, and he put his hatred of social reality and his sympathy for them into the music. At the same time, he was a supporter of the conservative dynasty. Tchaikovsky struggled with these self-contradictions, oscillating between optimism and pessimism, and these contradictory and complex inner struggles were reflected in his music, thus creating a musical image of his nationalism and pathos at the same time.

### 4. Dumka's style interpretation

#### 4.1 Ethnic sentiment

The development of Russian folk songs and dances has been colourful since ancient times. People by nature have a special affection for song and dance, and their joyful dances can be seen in various scenes of life, and folk songs have become an important source of inspiration for musical composition. Art comes from life and is above life, and only art that finds its prototype in real life can be considered good art in the true sense of the word. Tchaikovsky's music has a strong sense of the times, and every phrase is full of musical elements with a national flavour; the Russian people's fine character of hard work, simplicity and enthusiasm is evident in his music. Tchaikovsky once said: "My music also has a Russian element because I was born in a peaceful place, was infected from an early age by the ineffable beauty of Russian folk music, and strongly loved the various forms of expression that characterize Russia. In short, I am an authentic Russian".<sup>[2]</sup> In the second part of *Dumka*, the national character of the Russian people's cheerfulness is brought to life.

#### 4.2 Tragedy color

Religious constraints, social shackles and repressed realities contradicted people's bold personalities, which provided important material for Tchaikovsky's musical compositions, and the melancholic character of Russian music was also reflected. Tchaikovsky's lonely and sensitive childhood, characterized by a typical depressive psychological illness, and his difficult upbringing were also important reasons for the sadness in his music, as the loss of his mother at a young age, the distance of his friends and the failure of his love life caused him to lose confidence in life and increased his sense of tragedy. The spirit of the times is evident in his music, as well as in his later dissatisfaction with the dark rule of the Tsar and his desire for light. A series of factors forged Tchaikovsky's tragic emotions, and he hid his deepest cries and grievances in those poignant and moving phrases. The opening section of "*Dumka*" is slow and melodic, as if a sad story were being told, and at the same time there is a force for light in this sobbing melody.

## 5. Dumka's technical characteristics

### 5.1 Touching the keys and tone

Tone is crucial in piano playing and can be called the soul of the performance. Tone varies according to the touch of the keys, and different touches on the same piano have a direct impact on the effect of tone. [3]In order to have a perfect tone it is necessary to form a precise sense of sound in the mind, to imagine in the mind a sound that matches the musical image, and thus to express the inner feeling of the music in the moment when the keys are touched by the fingertips.

The opening section of *Dumka* places high demands on the player's touch, with the hands creating three layers of acoustic effect: the first layer is the melodic voice, where the touch is about the vertical strength of the fingers, requiring a deep but slow touch, while fluidly driving the horizontal strength of the arm to interpret this melody as a powerful but suppressed vulgarity. The second layer is the filler notes in the right hand voices, they give the piece an extra touch of heaviness, played with a good control of the speed and strength of the touches and a control of the height of the lifted fingers, so that they echo the melodic voices while being independent of each other. The third layer is the bass in the left-hand chords, where the touch of the key is transmitted from the body through the arm to the fingertips, resulting in a sad, heavy tone.

The famous Polish pianist Hoffmann said: "Generally speaking, the more notes on the score, the easier it is to play, that is to say, the easier it is to play musically. .... The most difficult music is when there are only a few notes, when the player must summon all his intelligence, energy and emotional strength to express the The most difficult music is when there are only a few notes, when the player must summon all his intellect, energy and emotion to express the meaning contained in these few notes and to connect them to each other. "[4]It is very difficult to play a single note of a chord with one hand alone, the touch of the key must be steady and the sound stronger than that of the other accompanying chords like.

### 5.2 Mastery of intensity

The diversity of musical character can be enriched by changes in intensity. Tchaikovsky's *Dumka* is a work in which lyricism and drama are opposed to each other, including a calm and calm psychological portrayal as well as a warm and joyful dance scene, so changes in intensity are particularly important.

In the second part of the piece, where the various dance images are contrasted, there are frequent changes in intensity, sometimes strong and sometimes weak, to reflect the splendour and grandeur of the scene. In particular, the continuous "fff" after 100 bars brings the piece to its climax. Towards the end of the piece, the intensity tends to be weaker, layered and nuanced, expressing the deep inner turmoil. This section should be played with power transmitted through the large arms to the fingertips, with a depth of sound and with a calmness and composure in the player's mind.

### 5.3 The use of the pedal

Rubinstein once said that "the pedal is the soul of the piano" and that the pedal, when used properly, makes the performance more brilliant, more vibrant in terms of tone and sound, and more melodic in terms of flow. In Tchaikovsky's *Dumka*, the pedal markings are not very detailed, giving the player a lot of freedom to play, which requires us to combine our own playing experience, to listen with our ears, to know where to use the pedal and how strong it should be:



Figure 1: Use of pedals.

This section is a fast and dynamic dance scene, so I would suggest using the pedal in the third bar in groups of four eighth notes and chords to make the right-hand octave melody flow more smoothly; the fourth bar is suitable for the pedal on the second and fourth eighth notes, where the line is clearly syncopated, which emphasizes the firmness and makes the music sound powerful, in contrast to the dull

and soft The musical image is in stark contrast to the dull and soft first part.

## 6. Conclusion

Tchaikovsky was a master of Russian folk music and Western European classical music, and his piano music is poetic and lyrical in its romantic sense, with a deep aesthetic value. His music has been described as the "soul of Russian music" because of the passionate, beautiful and intense orchestral style that it often brings to the listener. *Dumka* for piano is a work from the height of Tchaikovsky's creative powers. It has a tragic and national character, as it is based on two opposing themes, which are alternately tragic and vigorous, with ethnic elements. In order to perform this work, one must first understand the background and stylistic characteristics of the work, then master the technical characteristics of the performance, and finally, grasp the parts as a whole, and see the whole in the parts, so that one can play the music more perfectly.

## References

- [1] Maes, F.(2006) *A history of Russian music*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- [2] Tchaikovsky, A.(1940) *Recollections of Tchaikovsky*. *Music and Letters*. 2,103-109.
- [3] Wright, C. (2006) *Music in western civilization*. Belmont, CA: Thomson/Schirmer.
- [4] Hoffmann.(1957) *A Word for Young Pianist*. *Music Translation*. 4.