

“No Anthem Linked to Russia”: Tchaikovsky’s Piano Concerto No. 1 at the Olympic Games

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Abstract

At the 2020 Summer Games in Tokyo and again at the 2022 Winter Games in Beijing, Russian athletes taking home Olympic gold heard Tchaikovsky’s Piano Concerto No. 1 in B-Flat Minor, Op. 23 in place of their national anthem. The prohibition of Russia’s anthem, along with the nation’s flag and other state symbols at international sporting events, was the result of an investigation into Russia’s state-run doping program. Although this restriction was heavily debated on social media outlets during the Games, the choice of Tchaikovsky’s beloved concerto was widely accepted as a symbol of the Russian state. The “Russianness” of Tchaikovsky’s concerto, however, is capacious and complex. In this article, I examine the Russian state’s appropriation of Tchaikovsky’s concerto not only as a nationalist musical motif, but as an irredentist anthem reflecting President Vladimir Putin’s intention to restore Russia’s “historic frontiers.” In addition to analyzing how the work was deployed before, during, and after the 2020 and 2022 Games, the article explores the composition’s appearance in contemporary Russian internet culture, particularly in a popular mashup of the concerto with Queen’s anthem “We Will Rock You.” Arguing that these examples offer musical evidence for the political rhetoric that insists Ukraine is rightfully a part of Russia, this article illustrates the ways that musical nationalism has proven malleable and been (mis)used in the Russo-Ukrainian War.

Two ice skaters representing the Russian Olympic Committee (ROC), Anna Shcherbakova and Alexandra Trusova, along with Kaori Sakamoto of Japan, stand at attention in Beijing’s National Stadium in February 2022 as announcers cue the gold medalist’s national anthem. But the music heard is the introduction to a concert hall favorite, Tchaikovsky’s Piano Concerto No. 1 in B-Flat Minor, Op. 23. The minute-long excerpt replaced the “State Anthem of the Russian Federation,” which the World Anti-Doping Agency (WADA) banned along with the nation’s flag and other symbols, after an investigation into Russia’s state-run doping program.¹ Russia had been similarly sanctioned before the 2018 Winter Olympics in Pyeongchang, South Korea. Competitors were designated “Olympic Athletes from Russia,” or OAR, and heard the Olympic Anthem in place of Russia’s. But at the 2020 Olympic and Paralympic Summer Games in Tokyo and again at the 2022 Olympic Winter Games in Beijing, rules dictating the nation’s neutrality were relaxed somewhat.² As a result, Russia’s presence was even more keenly felt at recent Olympic Games. The use of powerful symbols, including Tchaikovsky’s First Piano Concerto, effectively collapsed any distinction between the Russian Federation and ROC athletes for audiences and international viewers, to say nothing of the athletes themselves.

The “Russianness” of the Piano Concerto No. 1, however, is complicated by Tchaikovsky’s compositional procedures, the work’s status as an international concert hall favorite, and its relationship to the nation’s history of Imperialism and Russification. This article examines how the Russian state has, to use Katerina Clark’s term, appropriated Tchaikovsky’s concerto—not only as a nationalist symbol but a

¹ A four-year ban by WADA imposed in 2019 was later reduced to just two years by the Court of Arbitration for Sport (CAS), from 2020 to 2022.

² Russian and Belarussian athletes were barred from competing at the 2022 Paralympic Games in Beijing following the invasion of Ukraine on February 24, 2022.

neo-Imperial anthem reflecting Putin's intention to restore Russia's "historic frontiers."³ This contention has animated far more than simply musical selections, of course. Russia invaded Ukraine on February 24, 2022, just one day after the closing ceremonies of the Beijing Games. Reports indicate that this timing was no coincidence. In early February, senior Chinese officials requested that Russia wait to invade Ukraine until the conclusion of the Winter Olympics in Beijing, according to a Western intelligence report cited by both senior Biden administration officials and a European official speaking with *The New York Times*.⁴ This request—and Russia's capitulation—suggests the significance of the Olympic Games not only to its host nation, but to Russia, which capitalized on the international press about its athletes' success and the popular support the ROC team enjoyed.⁵

After reviewing the history of Russia's national anthems from the tsarist period to the present, this article examines the pliability of Tchaikovsky's "Russianness" before turning to the symbolic impact of his First Piano Concerto as a substitute anthem, analyzing the Ukrainian quotations in Tchaikovsky's composition. In addition to considering how the work was deployed before, during, and after the 2020 and 2022 Games, the article explores the composition's appearance in contemporary Russian internet culture, including in a popular mashup of the concerto with Queen's anthem "We Will Rock You." Arguing that these examples demonstrate the appropriation of Tchaikovsky's composition as an irredentist anthem in contemporary Russia, this article illustrates the ways that musical nationalism has proven malleable and been (mis)used in the Russo-Ukrainian war.

The Politics of National Anthems in Russia

Before examining the use of Tchaikovsky's piano concerto as a substitute anthem, it is valuable to consider the history of Russia's national anthems, as all these musical works illustrate dimensions of Russia's imperial legacy. Further, though it is widely understood that national anthems are political documents, this article argues that the choice of the Tchaikovsky as a substitute anthem (like the Russian Federation's present national anthem) reflects the Putin administration's political and military campaign to reclaim parts of the former Russian Empire or Soviet Union. The reworkings of Russia's national anthem in the present day are thus part of a much longer history.

Like many other European nations, Russia initially adopted the English anthem, "God Save the King" during the Napoleonic Wars (1803–1815).⁶ While "Molitva russkogo Naroda" or "Prayer of the Russian People," as the hymn was known in Russian, served to unite the nation under Alexander I, his successor Nicholas I is said to have disliked the use of an English melody. He commissioned a new anthem—"Bozhe tsaria khрани," or "God Save the Tsar"—from composer Aleksei L'vov, the director of

³ See Pauline Fairclough, *Classics for the Masses: Shaping Soviet Musical Identity Under Lenin and Stalin* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2016) for an application for this term to musical repertoire, as well as Katerina Clark, *Moscow, the Fourth Rome: Stalinism, Cosmopolitanism and the Evolution of Soviet Culture, 1931–1941* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2011). "Putin spends 3.5 minutes speaking to Russians gathered at stadium rally," *Meduza*, February 22, 2023, <https://meduza.io/en/news/2023/02/22/putin-spends-3-5-minutes-speaking-to-russians-gathered-at-stadium-rally>.

⁴ Edward Wong and Julian E. Barner, "Report Suggests Chinese Knew of Plan to Invade," *New York Times*, March 3, 2022, A9. There has been some speculation that the request may have been made by Chinese President Xi Jinping to Russian President Vladimir Putin during his visit to China for the opening ceremonies.

⁵ At the 2020 Summer Games, ROC earned 20 gold medals and a total of 71 medals altogether, claiming fifth place in the medal standings. At the 2022 Winter Games, ROC earned 32 medals, the second largest number after Norway, but ranked ninth in medal standings.

⁶ The text was translated by Russian poet Vasilii Zhukovskii in 1814.

the court capella.⁷

“God Save the Tsar” was closely associated with Russia’s victory in the War of 1812. First performed for Nicholas I in December 1833 on the twenty-first anniversary of the expulsion of Napoleon’s forces from Russian soil, its official debut was at a ceremony to mark the opening of the Alexander Column, a monument to Russia’s military might in Saint Petersburg’s Palace Square. Tchaikovsky further cemented the association between “Bozhe tsaria khрани” and what Russians called the Patriotic War by quoting the anthem’s melody in *The Year 1812, Solemn Overture*, Op. 49, written for the 1880 consecration of the Church of Christ the Saviour in Moscow, which had been built to “signify Our gratitude to Divine Providence for saving Russia from the doom that overshadowed Her” during the military clashes with Napoleon, according to Alexander I.⁸ The Russian anthem is quoted in several of Tchaikovsky’s other compositions, including the 1876 *Marche Slave* in B-flat minor, Op. 31, commissioned by the Russian Musical Society to raise funds for the benefit of Serbian soldiers wounded during the Serbian-Ottoman War (1876–1877).⁹

“Bozhe tsaria khрани” remained the national anthem of the Russian Empire—which encompassed part or all of the modern-day states of Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Estonia, Finland, Georgia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, the Republic of Moldova, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Ukraine, and Uzbekistan—until 1917. Following the February Revolution and the abdication of Nicholas II, efforts to revise the text of “God Save the Tsar” failed to gain support.¹⁰ Eventually, the “Internationale,” a standard of the socialist movement, became the unofficial anthem, first of the independent federal socialist state of Russia, and then of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR).

In May 1943, the USSR announced a competition for a new Russian-authored anthem to replace the French “Internationale,” which would promote wartime patriotism and support the increasing Russo-centrism in Soviet ideology and policy.¹¹ The “State Anthem of the Soviet Union” was publicly premiered on Soviet radio at midnight on December 31, 1943—just six months from the start of efforts to replace the “Internationale”—and officially adopted as the anthem in March 1944.¹² After Khrushchev’s infamous denunciation of Stalin in 1956, the anthem’s lyrics, which extolled the former Soviet leader, were abandoned. For nearly two decades after 1956, the anthem was officially performed without text before revised lyrics were adopted in 1977 to mark the sixtieth anniversary of the October Revolution.

The last decade of the twentieth century once again proved momentous in Russian politics—and, along with it, the history of the state’s anthem. Following the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991, President Boris Yeltsin decreed Glinka’s “Patriotic Hymn,” which had briefly served as the Russian State Federative Socialist Republics (RSFSR) regional anthem from 1990–1991, as the new national anthem of the Russian Federation. Despite the enduring popularity of Glinka’s music, his “Patriotic Hymn” was an

⁷ Caroline Brooke, “Changing Identities: The Russian and Soviet National Anthems,” *Slavonica* 13, no. 1 (2007): 28.

⁸ Quoted in John Garrard and Carol Garrard, *Russian Orthodoxy Resurgent: Faith and Power in the New Russia* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2008), 83. In addition to *God Save the Tsar*, the 1812 Overture also quotes “La Marseillaise,” the French national anthem banned by Napoleon in 1805.

⁹ For a more complete discussion of Tchaikovsky’s use of the tsarist anthem, see William H. Parsons, “Tchaikovsky, the Tsars, and the Tsarist National Anthem” in *Tchaikovsky and His Contemporaries: A Centennial Symposium*, ed. Alexandar Mihailovic (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1999), 227–33.

¹⁰ Orlando Figes and Boris Kolonitskii, *Interpreting the Russian Revolution: The Language and Symbols of 1917* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1999), 51.

¹¹ For an examination of the various political motivations behind this decision, see Brooke, “Changing Identities: The Russian and Soviet National Anthems,” 31–35; and Christopher Kelen, *Anthem Quality: National Songs—A Theoretical Survey* (Bristol: Intellect, 2015), 163.

¹² Brooke, “Changing Identities: The Russian and Soviet National Anthems,” 32.

unpopular replacement for the earlier anthem, in large part because the original hymn had no lyrics and an agreement on a suitable text for the melody was never reached.

Seeing an opportunity to define Russia symbolically shortly after his first presidential election in 2000, Vladimir Putin proposed replacing the Glinka melody with none other than the “State Anthem of the Soviet Union,” albeit with new text. Reinstating the Soviet anthem enjoyed broad public support, but critics in government and Russia’s cultural intelligentsia raised concerns about the glorification of a repressive regime and the Putin administration’s nostalgia for Soviet totalitarianism.¹³ Despite fierce debate, deputies voted overwhelmingly in favor of reintroducing the Soviet anthem, as well as adopting the Muscovite two-headed eagle and the white, blue, and red flag originally devised by Peter the Great as official symbols.¹⁴ In short, the Putin administration embraced a *mélange* of national symbols glorifying Russia’s imperial legacy and colonialist history.¹⁵

A new text for the old anthem was approved by Putin and premiered at the Kremlin during a New Year’s reception on December 31, 2000.¹⁶ Much was made in Western media about the references to God in the anthem, often called “Rossiya—Svyashchennaya Nasha Derzhava [Russia, You Are Our Sacred Power].” This overt rejection of Soviet state atheism and Putin’s embrace of the Orthodox Church have disguised what some scholars have termed the “re-Stalinization” of modern Russian society.¹⁷ The autocracy of the Soviet era is further recalled in the strict law regulating performance of and behavior during the Russian anthem.¹⁸ In addition to mandated performances at the opening and closing sessions of the legislature, official state ceremonies, and during sporting events, the anthem is broadcast twice daily on television and radio. Men are prohibited from wearing head coverings during performances of the anthem, and everyone must turn and face the flag if one is present. Further, Russian legal code states: “Any performance or use of the anthem in violation of this law, and also disrespect toward the anthem will be subject to prosecution in accordance with the legislation of the Russian Federation.”¹⁹ Today, it is difficult to ignore how Putin’s campaign to resurrect music and other symbols representing Russia’s imperial ambitions seems to presage his administration’s politics, specifically his insistence on the restoration of what he terms Russia’s “historic frontiers.”

¹³ The Russian debate about the reinstatement of the “Hymn” of the Soviet Union is examined in J. Martin Daughtry, “Russia’s New Anthem and the Negotiation of National Identity,” *Ethnomusicology* 47, no. 1 (2003): 42–67.

¹⁴ The vote in the State Duma took place on December 8, 2000, and was approved by the Federation Council shortly thereafter. Sophie Lambroschini, “Russia: Duma Votes To Reinstall Soviet Anthem,” Radio Free Europe Radio Liberty, December 8, 2000, <https://www.rferl.org/a/1095314.html>.

¹⁵ For a discussion of Soviet coloniality, see, among others, Epp Annus, *Soviet Postcolonial Studies: A View from the Western Borderlands* (London: Routledge, 2018); Vitaly Chernetsky, *Mapping Postcommunist Cultures: Russia and Ukraine in the Context of Globalization* (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2007); David Chioni Moore, “Is the Post- in Postcolonial the Post- in Post-Soviet? Towards a Global Postcolonial Critique,” *PMLA* 116, No. 1 (2001): 111–28; and Rosamund Bartlett and Philip Ross Bullock, “Issues in Russian Musical Identity,” *Slavonica* 13, no. 1 (2007): 3–5.

¹⁶ David Hoffman, “Russians to Sing of God, Not of Lenin: Putin Approves New Lyrics to Go with Soviet-Era Tune for National Anthem,” *The Washington Post*, December 31, 2000, A23.

¹⁷ For a discussion of re-Stalinization in contemporary Russia, see Walter Laqueur, *Putinism: Russia and Its Future in the West* (New York: Thomas Dunne Books, 2015); and Maria Lipman, Lev Gudkov, and Lasha Bakradze, *The Stalin Puzzle: Deciphering Post-Soviet Public Opinion* (Washington, DC: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2013). Examples of recent Russian-language texts that lionize the brutal Soviet leader include Konstantin Romanenko, *Pochemu Nenavidiat Stalina?: Vragi Rossii Protiv Vozhdia* (Moscow: IAuza-press, 2013) and Nodari Aleksandrovich Simoniya, ed. *Istoriografiya Stalinizma* (Moscow: ROSSPEN, 2007).

¹⁸ Although certain codes of behavior often accompany the performance of a national anthem (and those who refuse can prompt controversy as a result), it is rare that such behavior is legally prescribed, as is the case in Russia. For a discussion of Russia’s mandate, see Daughtry, “Russia’s New Anthem and the Negotiation of National Identity,” 46; and Kelen, *Anthem Quality: National Songs*, 45.

¹⁹ Translation of 2001 law by Daughtry, “Russia’s New Anthem and the Negotiation of National Identity,” 46.

“A Symbol of Putin’s Imperial Russia”

These tumultuous debates about the Russian anthem and its cultural significance informed the Russian response to the 2020 ban on its national symbols in international sport. Although Tchaikovsky’s First Piano Concerto has proven popular (and politically effective), it was not the first choice of Russian officials when they were asked to offer an alternative anthem. According to Stanislav Pozdnyakov, President of the ROC, the ROC’s Athletes’ Commission voted for “Katyusha,” a popular mass song composed in 1938 by Matvey Blanter with lyrics by Mikhail Isakovsky about a Russian woman waiting for the return of her beloved, a soldier protecting the Motherland.²⁰ One of the few Soviet mass songs that achieved international recognition, “Katyusha” is strongly identified with the Soviet fight against Nazi Germany in World War II.²¹ Many Russians supported the athletes’ choice of “Katyusha,” citing its popularity as well as the democratic nature of their vote. Despite this, “Katyusha” was rejected by the Court of Arbitration for Sport (CAS), an international body established to settle disputes related to sport. In its decision, the Court cited the rule that “the Russian national anthem (or any anthem linked to Russia) shall not be officially played or sung.” In a statement to the Associated Press, the Court clarified that “The CAS panel considers that ‘any anthem linked to Russia’ extends to any song associated with, or with links to, Russia, which would include ‘Katyusha.’”²²

Before the CAS’s decision was announced, People’s Artist of Russia Dennis Matsuev—who performed during the Closing Ceremonies of the 2014 Winter Games in Sochi—confessed to state news agency RIA Novosti that he, personally, would have selected a classical composition to represent Russia. “Nothing unites athletes, and indeed people in general,” Matsuev said, “more than the music of Pyotr Tchaikovsky or Sergei Rachmaninoff. We have a large repertoire: Tchaikovsky’s symphonies, *Romeo and Juliet*, the 1812 [Overture], Rachmaninoff’s *Bells* or Sergei Prokofiev’s cantata *Alexander Nevsky*. After such music, it is impossible to lose.”²³ In February 2021, one month after Matsuev’s comments and while the CAS was still deliberating the choice of “Katyusha,” the International Skating Union (ISU), the governing body for competitive ice skating disciplines, announced that Tchaikovsky’s First Piano Concerto could be used at award ceremonies for Russian athletes during the 2021 World Figure Skating, Speed Skating, and Short Track World Championships.²⁴ Not long after, the ROC and CAS agreed that the same composition could be used for award ceremonies at the Olympics Games; Matsuev was the pianist tapped to record the Tchaikovsky staple.²⁵

The perceived lack of representational function in music, and particularly untexted classical music, seems to have appealed to the CAS when they agreed to the popular concerto as a substitute anthem. Music can, of course, convey a wealth of meanings through the context of its creation, text, setting and

²⁰ Michael Scollon, “Popular Soviet War Ballad May Come To The Defense Of The Motherland As Russia’s Olympic ‘Anthem’,” Radio Free Europe Radio Liberty, January 19, 2021, <https://www.rferl.org/a/russia-olympics-doping-ban-anthem-katyusha-soviet-war-ballad/31052062.html>.

²¹ James von Geldern and Richard Stites, *Mass Culture in Soviet Russia: Tales, Poems, Songs, Movies, Plays, and Folklore, 1917–1953* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995), 315.

²² Graham Dunbar, “Russian folk song rejected as substitute Olympic anthem,” the Associated Press, March 12, 2021, <https://apnews.com/article/tokyo-music-russia-germany-doping-ee3a96bd3ced1929d3e8c4092919fa7c>.

²³ “Matsuev otreagiroval na ideyu zamenit’ “Katyushey” gimn Rossii” RIA Novosti, January 14, 2021, <https://rsport.ria.ru/20210114/matsuev-1593058452.html>.

²⁴ “ISU clears use of Tchaikovsky music as anthem by Russian figure skaters,” TASS, February 12, 2021, <https://tass.com/sports/1255955>.

²⁵ “World’s famous pianist Matsuev offers various versions of Tchaikovsky for Russian athletes,” TASS, May 17, 2021, <https://tass.com/sport/1290561>.

performers, or our associations with similar musical sounds. Its malleability and the difficulty in regulating its use is part of what has made music such an effective—albeit imprecise—political and propagandistic tool. Without explicit patriotic sentiment in a text, the concerto was not understood as “an anthem linked to Russia” in the manner of “Katyusha.”²⁶ But, in fact, this work features Ukrainian tunes that represent the political realities of the late Imperial period in which it was composed, and its use as an anthem resonates with the Putin administration’s attitude toward Russia’s former colonies and republics. To that end, the use of the concerto partakes of a longer history of Tchaikovsky and his oeuvre’s fraught relation with Russian nationalism since the nineteenth century. Often “denigrated for not being as ‘national’ as his ‘kuchkist’ rivals,” the composer came to detest what Richard Taruskin has termed “the myth of Russian autochthonism,” particularly in Western scholarship, where Tchaikovsky’s blend of European compositional practices and musical material from the Russian Empire (which have made him an enduring concert hall favorite) has often relegated him to the sidelines of scholarship on nineteenth-century music.²⁷

Although the composer’s place in musical scholarship has sometimes been precarious, his position in Imperial Russia was relatively stable. Tchaikovsky nurtured several politically and financially important relationships with the Russian monarchy, including with Tsar Alexander III.²⁸ Though best known as an autocratic emperor who reversed many of the liberal reforms instituted by his father, Alexander III was also an enthusiastic amateur musician and ballet patron. In 1884, the tsar personally awarded Tchaikovsky the Order of Saint Vladimir (fourth class), which included a title of hereditary nobility. The honor is understood as an official seal of approval that permitted the composer to recover from the scandal of his failed marriage to Antonina Ivanovna Milyukova in 1877.²⁹ The composer dedicated several works to the tsar and his wife, Maria Feodorovna, including the *Festival Overture on the Danish National Anthem*, Op. 15, which honored the bride’s Danish heritage. Some of Tchaikovsky’s most enduring stage works, including *The Sleeping Beauty* (1890), *The Queen of Spades* (1890), and *The Nutcracker* (1892), were commissioned by the Imperial Theatres. At the instigation of Ivan Vsevolozhsky, Director of the Imperial Theatres, the composer was awarded a lifetime annual pension from the Tsar, “thus making Tchaikovsky the premier court composer, in practice if not in name.”³⁰

Tchaikovsky’s close relationship to the monarchy and its institutions did not substantially complicate his position as “a core element of Soviet mainstream repertoire” in the early Soviet period.³¹ In her work on musical assimilation of nineteenth-century Russian music in the Soviet Union, Pauline Fairclough notes that “the huge rise in his popularity in the mature Stalin era merely built upon a performance

²⁶ The most politically charged performance of the work before its use as a substitute anthem in 2020 was arguably American pianist Van Cliburn’s unexpected win at the inaugural Tchaikovsky Competition in Moscow in 1958. For more on the competition and the Soviet response to Cliburn’s win, see Kiril Tomoff, “From a Musical Holiday to the Tchaikovsky Competition: Moscow as a Global Center of Musical Culture,” in *Virtuosi Abroad: Soviet Music and Imperial Competition during the Early Cold War, 1945–1958* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2015), 82–113.

²⁷ Richard Taruskin, “Some Thoughts on the History and Historiography of Russian Music,” in *On Russian Music* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009), 30–31.

²⁸ These include Grand Duke Konstantin Konstantinovich, a cousin of Alexander III whose poems the composer set on several occasions, and Prince Vladimir Petrovich Meshchersky, an author and prominent counselor to the tsar.

²⁹ David Brown, *Tchaikovsky: A Biographical and Critical Study, vol. 3: The Years of Wandering (1878–1885)* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1986), 254–5.

³⁰ Francis Maes, *A History of Russian Music: From Kamarinskaya to Babi Yar*, trans. Arnold J. Pomerans and Erica Pomerans (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), 141.

³¹ Fairclough, *Classics for the Masses*, 21.

tradition that had never gone away, rather than requiring a full-blown ‘rehabilitation’ of the composer.”³² Indeed, by the late 1930s and early 1940s, “Tchaikovsky occupied the prime position as the Number One Soviet favorite” of all the Russian composers—much as he had in Imperial Russia by the late 1880s.³³ A committee was formed to organize celebrations for the centennial of his birth in 1940; the plan, personally approved by Stalin, included publications, performances, and the renaming of the music conservatories in the capital cities of both Russia and Ukraine in honor of Tchaikovsky.

Tchaikovsky’s national identity remains debated in Ukraine, where some believe that the composer is “a Ukrainian in creative spirit.”³⁴ In a *Washington Post* report about a wartime concert at the conservatory in Kyiv, correspondent-at-large Sudarsan Raghavan wrote, “For decades, Ukrainians have cringed as Russians embraced Tchaikovsky as their own. Ukrainians argue that the great composer saw himself as Ukrainian and spent many years visiting Kyiv and other parts of Ukraine.”³⁵ It is true that Tchaikovsky’s paternal lineage can be traced to a small village in the Poltava region in modern-day Ukraine. His great-grandfather, a Cossack named Fyodor Chaika, distinguished himself under Peter the Great at the Battle of Poltava in 1709,³⁶ a decisive Russian victory over Sweden and a faction of the Ukrainian Hetmanate led by Ivan Mazepa that ultimately established Russian Imperial supremacy in Northern Europe.³⁷ Tchaikovsky’s beloved sister Aleksandra (Sasha) and her husband Lev Davydov lived in Kam’yanka, near Kyiv, and the composer typically spent summers on their estate. His patron Nadezhda von Meck had a country estate in Brailiv, in the Vinnytsia oblast of Ukraine, where the composer regularly worked.³⁸ In the summer of 1864, Tchaikovsky composed his first significant orchestral work, *The Storm*, Op. 76, at the family estate of Prince Aleksey Golitsyn in the Ukrainian city of Trostyanets, near the Russian border; a number of the estate’s structures were damaged during the Russian invasion and capture of the city on March 1, 2022, though it was liberated in April 2022 after several weeks of occupation.³⁹

Several of Tchaikovsky’s important compositions were either fully or partly composed in what is now Ukraine, feature Ukrainian settings, and explore scenes in Ukrainian history as well as contain Ukrainian musical material, namely folk songs. In addition to *The Storm* and the First Piano Concerto, discussed in depth below, these works include *Mazepa* (1884), an opera set in eighteenth-century Ukraine and based on Pushkin’s poem about the Battle of Poltava, which features Ukrainian as well as Russian folk tunes; and *Cherevichki* (1887), a revision of an earlier opera titled *Vakula the Smith* (1876), set in part in a Ukrainian village during the reign of Catherine the Great that, like *Mazepa*, features a mix of Ukrainian and Russian folk songs. The composer’s Symphony No. 2 in C minor, Op. 17 (1872), composed primarily at his sister’s estate in Kam’yanka, has garnered attention recently for its nickname, “Little Russian,” the prevailing term until the end of the nineteenth century for much of the modern territory of Ukraine. The

³² Fairclough, *Classics for the Masses*, 21.

³³ Fairclough, *Classics for the Masses*, 158.

³⁴ Heorhii Shybanov, “Pyotr Tchaikovsky, a Ukrainian by creative spirit: Tracing the great composer’s lineage,” *Den*, April 14, 2009, <https://dav.kyiv.ua/en/article/culture/pyotr-tchaikovsky-ukrainian-creative-spirit>.

³⁵ Sudarsan Raghavan, “Music as resistance: Kyiv’s orchestra plays on,” *The Washington Post*, March 10, 2022, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2022/03/10/ukraine-russia-orchestra-music/>.

³⁶ Alexander Poznansky, “Tchaikovsky: A Life Reconsidered,” in *Tchaikovsky and His World*, ed. Leslie Kearney (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1998), 4.

³⁷ See “Poltava 1709: The Battle and the Myth” in *Harvard Ukrainian Studies* 31, Nos. 1–4 (2009–2010) for additional information regarding this battle and its impact.

³⁸ A list of Tchaikovsky’s major visits to Ukrainian cities including Kyiv, Kam’yanka, and Brailiv are available at <https://en.Tchaikovsky-research.net/pages/Category:Ukraine>.

³⁹ Shaun Walker, “‘Barbarians’: Russian troops leave grisly mark on town of Trostianets,” *The Guardian*, April 5, 2022, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/apr/05/barbarians-russian-troops-leave-grisly-mark-on-ukraine-town-of-trostianets>.

moniker was bestowed by critic Nikolay Kashkin because the work incorporated several Ukrainian folk songs.⁴⁰ Today, however, “Little Russia” is used in Russian nationalist discourse to deny Ukrainian sovereignty. Unsurprisingly, the term is widely rejected by Ukrainians, who object to the denial of Ukrainian cultural and political independence implicit in this term. For this reason, some Western orchestras have removed this work from planned programs,⁴¹ while others are careful to avoid using the nickname.⁴²

Despite Tchaikovsky’s relationship to and engagement with Ukrainian culture, he was born and raised in Russia and understood himself as Russian.⁴³ For this reason, some Ukrainians have criticized the role the Imperial composer popular with the Putin administration has played in Ukrainian cultural life, particularly since Russia’s invasion in 2022. Students at the Ukrainian National Tchaikovsky Academy of Music in Kyiv, for example, have repeatedly pushed for the removal of the composer’s name from the institution.⁴⁴ An electronic petition submitted to the Office of the President of Ukraine in early November 2022 (after the conservatory’s Academic Council voted against a name change in June) states, in part, “The fact that the academy still bears the name of the Russian composer Tchaikovsky is a spit in the face of the independence of Ukrainian culture, and any attempts to justify it with various myths are another manifestation of the inferiority complex.”⁴⁵ Pushing back against the narrative of Tchaikovsky as a native Ukrainian, these students argue that measures to “de-Russify” Ukraine, including the removal of monuments and the renaming of streets honoring authors like Alexander Pushkin and Maxim Gorky, should include the composer as well.

Members of Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy’s administration have also raised concerns about Tchaikovsky’s appropriation by the present Russian regime. Oleksandr Tkachenko, Ukraine’s Minister of Culture, called for a boycott of “Kremlin-favoured works” in an op-ed for *The Guardian* published in early December of 2022. Tkachenko specifically invoked Tchaikovsky in his plea that Western allies “paus[e] performances of his works until Russia ceases its bloody invasion,” citing “more than 800 cases of destruction: monuments and works of art, museums, valuable historical buildings” in what he termed “a civilizational battle over culture and history.”⁴⁶ Ukrainian scholar and cultural critic Maksym Strikha summarizes the situation thusly: “Whether we like it or not, today Tchaikovsky is one of

⁴⁰ John Warrack, *Tchaikovsky Symphonies and Concertos*, rev. ed. (London: British Broadcasting Corporation, 1974), 17–20.

⁴¹ “Cardiff Philharmonic removes Tchaikovsky from programme in light of Russian invasion of Ukraine,” *BBC Music Magazine*, March 9, 2022, <https://www.classical-music.com/news/cardiff-philharmonic-removes-Tchaikovsky-from-programme-in-light-of-russian-invasion-of-ukraine/>.

⁴² Steven Winn, “Elim Chan and SF Symphony Caught Star-Gazing,” *SF Classical Voice*, January 16, 2023, <https://www.sfcv.org/articles/review/elim-chan-and-sf-symphony-caught-stargazing>.

⁴³ “I am Russian in the fullest sense of the word,” the composer declared in a letter to von Meck. Tchaikovsky to Nadezhda von Meck, March 5/17, 1878, in *P. I. Chaykovskiy: Polnoe sobranie sochineniy*, tom VII (Moscow: Gosudarstvennoe Muzykal’noe Izdatel’stvo, 1962), 154–6.

⁴⁴ Rostyslav Khotin, “The Rumble Over Russian Composer Tchaikovsky At An Elite Ukrainian Conservatory,” *Radio Free Europe Radio Liberty*, March 4, 2023, <https://www.rferl.org/a/tchaikovsky-ukraine-music-convervatory-remove-name-russia-invasion/32299420.html>.

⁴⁵ Rostyslav Khotin, “‘Korinna rosiys'ka lyudina.’ Chi varto usuvati im'ya Chaykovs'kogo z nazvi Natsional'noï muzichnoï akademii?” *Radio Svoboda*, December 28, 2022, <https://www.radiosvoboda.org/a/ukravina-kompozytor-chaikovsky-muzychna-akademii-pereyemuvannya/32197362.html>. The conservatory’s Academic Council have repeatedly voted against a name change.

⁴⁶ Oleksandr Tkachenko, “As Ukraine’s culture minister, I’m asking you to boycott Tchaikovsky until this war is over,” *The Guardian*, December 7, 2022, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2022/dec/07/ukraine-culture-minister-boycott-tchaikovsky-war-russia-kremlin>.

the symbols of Putin’s imperial Russia.”⁴⁷

Musical Russification and Tchaikovsky’s Piano Concerto No. 1

The Piano Concerto No. 1 in B-Flat Minor, Op. 23 is one of Tchaikovsky’s many works that contain Ukrainian musical material. It was composed between November 1874 and February 1875, often while the composer was in modern-day Ukraine, and premiered by the German pianist Hans von Bülow in Boston, Massachusetts, on October 25, 1875. Today the concerto is one of Tchaikovsky’s most popular compositions and a concert hall staple. The work begins with a substantial introduction, a “grand initial flourish” that was excerpted for performance at the Summer and Winter Olympic Games.⁴⁸

The first movement’s main theme was inspired by a singer Tchaikovsky heard during a visit to present-day Ukraine. In the spring of 1879, while working on revisions to the concerto at the von Meck estate in Brailiv, Tchaikovsky confided to his patron the source of his musical inspiration. He wrote:

I heard a blind lyrical singer. He called himself “lyrical” after the name of the accompanying instrument—a lyre, which nevertheless had nothing in common with the traditional lyre. It’s remarkable that all the blind singers in Little Russia [*sic*] play one and the same folk-melody endlessly. I partly used this tune in the first movement of my Piano Concerto.⁴⁹

Here, Tchaikovsky describes an encounter with a *lirnyk*, or itinerant Ukrainian musician. Lirnyky were typically blind and performed songs to the accompaniment of a crank-driven hurdy gurdy called a *lira*.⁵⁰ Like the *kobzars*, who played the *bandura* or *kobza*, lirnyky were members of well-organized guilds with extensive training expectations and shared repertoire—hence Tchaikovsky’s claim that “all the blind singers in Little Russia play one and the same folk-melody.” As was typical in the nineteenth century, the composer uses the term “Little Russia” to refer to Ukraine. Tchaikovsky includes a brief transcription in his May 9 letter: the contours of this musical motif in Figure 1 are quite legible in the Allegro con spirito theme below in Figure 2.

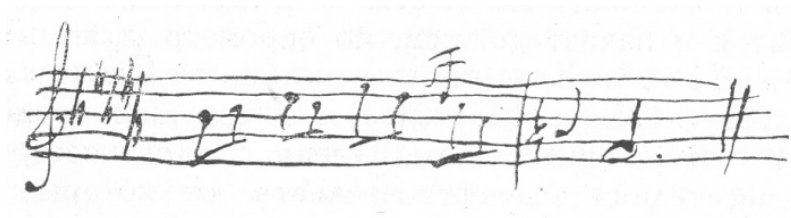


Figure 1: Transcription of Ukrainian folk tune by Tchaikovsky.

⁴⁷ Rostyslav Khotin, “‘Korinna rosiys'ka lyudina.’ Chi varto usuvati im'ya Chaykovs'kogo z nazvi Natsional'noi muzichnoi akademii?” Radio Svoboda, December 28, 2022, <https://www.radiosvoboda.org/a/ukravina-kompozvtor-chaikovskyy-muzychna-akademiya-perevmenuvannya/32197362.html>.

⁴⁸ David Brown, *Tchaikovsky: The Man and His Music* (London: Faber and Faber, 2006), 96.

⁴⁹ Tchaikovsky to Nadezhda von Meck, May 6/18–13/25, 1879, in *P. I. Chaykovskiy: Polnoe sobranie sochineniy*, tom VIII (Moscow: Gosudarstvennoe Muzykal'noe Izdatel'stvo, 1963), 202–8.

⁵⁰ Oksana Ovsyuk, “The Kobzar-Lirnyk Tradition,” Ivan Honchar Museum (National Centre of Folk Culture), December 9, 2021, <https://honchar.org.ua/en/blog/the-kobzar-lirnyk-tradition-i146>.



Figure 2: Allegro con spirito theme.

This tune, though brief, represents a rich source of melodic fragments on which many of the concerto's themes are based.⁵¹ While both G. A. Tumenev and Francis Maes assert that this folk melody was “Oi, kriache, kriache, chernyi voron (Oh, caw, caw, black raven),” the transcription in Tchaikovsky's letter as well as the concerto's theme bear little to no resemblance to versions of the tune published in circulating song collections of the period, including Vasily Fedorovich Trutovsky's *Sobranie ruskikh prostykh pesen s notami*, published in 1779, or Jan Bogumil Prach's *Sobranie narodnykh ruskikh piesen*, dated 1790.⁵² Of course, as Tchaikovsky's letter was written several years after the composition of the concerto (and ostensibly his encounter with the lirnyk), he may have misremembered what he had heard or transcribed it incorrectly. But the motif in Figure 1 is different enough from the sonata's main theme pictured in Figure 2 to suggest that Tchaikovsky may have revisited earlier sketches or even heard the tune again during his present working retreat in Ukraine, as his marveling over the shared repertoire of these singers in his letter to von Meck might indicate. Whatever song Tchaikovsky heard, the composer was explicit about his use of folk music from Ukraine within the piano concerto.

Further, Tchaikovsky's use of Ukrainian music was not limited to the work's first movement.⁵³ In the third and final movement, he employs the Ukrainian song “Viidi, viidi, Ivanku” (Come, come, Ivanka), a round dance about the arrival of spring. Tchaikovsky borrowed the tune from former classmate Aleksandr Ivanovich Rubets's collection of Ukrainian folk songs published in 1872.⁵⁴ Its melodic and harmonic repetition, both notable features of Ukrainian dance tunes, as well as the song's two-voice character are preserved in Tchaikovsky's quotation, indicating his understanding of the music's style and structure.⁵⁵

The distinctly Ukrainian musical heritage Tchaikovsky mines, however, was classified as a “sub-species” of Russian song by folk song editors and arrangers of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.⁵⁶ The long-term effect of this musical Russification is that only now are Western scholars beginning to

⁵¹ Jeremy Norris citing the Soviet musicologist Alexander Alekseev who wrote, in 1969, “The themes of the concerto have a lot in common, and they grow out of the Introduction,” in *The Russian Piano Concerto* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994), 127.

⁵² A. Orlova, *Pyotr Il'ich Chaikovskii* (Moscow: Izdatel'stvo Muzyka, 1980), 55; Maes, *A History of Russian Music: From Kamarinskaya to Babi Yar*, 76.

⁵³ The concerto's second movement also quotes a French song, “Il faut s'amuser, danser et rire,” a staple of Désirée Artôt's repertoire.

⁵⁴ Aleksandr Ivanovich Rubets, *Dvesti shestnadsat' narodnykh ukrainskikh napievov* (Moscow: P.I. Jurgenson, 1872).

⁵⁵ Norris, *The Russian Piano Concerto*, 133.

⁵⁶ K. A. Papmehl, “An Eighteenth-Century English Translation of a Ukrainian Folk Song,” *Canadian Slavonic Papers/Revue Canadienne des Slavistes* 24, no. 2 (1982): 179. Prach's *Sobranie narodnykh ruskikh niesen*, for example, lists Ukrainian songs within his Russian folk song anthology under the heading “Pesni Malorossijskij,” meaning “Little Russian [read: Ukrainian] songs,” much as one might identify Appalachian folk songs as a distinctive tradition within American folk music, for example.

engage with the wealth of distinct traditions and practices that make up so-called “Russian” music, which flattens the music of regions of the former empire or USSR. (Igor Stravinsky’s “Russian” period, during which he made use of folk materials from across the empire, is a familiar example.) The Russian language has terminology to differentiate between the multiethnic empire—*rossiiskii*—and the ethnic Russian—*russkii*—though admittedly, these terms are porous and often represent political ideologies.⁵⁷ Such distinctions, however, are lost in much English-language scholarship. This is in part for lack of terminology, but also to avoid the complex historical and contemporary issues such distinctions raise around nationality and identity. Beyond the significant cultural differences and political ideologies unexplored, musical Russification suggests that Ukrainian music is inferior to Russian music, a mere regional curiosity that can lend “local color” to serious compositions.⁵⁸ Tchaikovsky scholar David Brown’s assessment of the piano concerto’s first movement captures such attitudes toward Ukrainian music. Though he acknowledges some censorious comments about the concerto’s “huge opening tune,” he dismisses the idea that “the first (and comparatively very trivial) Ukrainian folksong” that follows it could be an appropriate introduction, writing, “In any case, can you really imagine beginning the concerto with the Ukrainian folk tune?”⁵⁹

The marginalization of Ukrainian music, language, and culture, first under the Russian Empire, then during the Soviet period, and now during Putin’s administration, helps to justify the assertion that Ukraine is a territory rightfully belonging to Russia rather than a sovereign state. In July 2021, Russia’s Office of the President published an article titled, “On the Historical Unity of Russians and Ukrainians,” which repeatedly described citizens of the two nations as “one people” and characterizing Ukraine’s attempt to establish national sovereignty as a plot to “sow discord” and “divide and then to pit the parts of a single people against one another.”⁶⁰ The article, attributed to Putin, almost entirely avoids acknowledging repeated efforts to suppress the Ukrainian language,⁶¹ falsely inferring that Ukrainian is a dialect of Russian.⁶² This linguistic erasure serves “to ensure that Ukrainians are not a separate ethnic group, but rather a kind of Russian,” just as the distinct traditions of Ukrainian folk music were collapsed into the broader category of Russian song.⁶³

While ignoring centuries of cultural Russification in Ukraine, Putin’s article is quick to cry foul over recent attempts to promote the use of the Ukrainian language in that country, including the 2019 “Law on Supporting the Functioning of the Ukrainian Language as the State Language.” Although the European Commission for Democracy through Law has judged that the 2019 statute “fails to strike a fair balance between the legitimate aim of strengthening and promoting the Ukrainian language and sufficiently

⁵⁷ Olga Maiorova, *From the Shadow of Empire. Defining the Russian Nation Through Cultural Mythology, 1855–1870* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2010), 5–6. For a discussion of these terms, see also Geoffrey A. Hosking, *Russia: People and Empire, 1552–1917* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997), xix; and Elena Dubinets, *Russian Composers Abroad: How They Left, Stayed, Returned* (Bloomington: University of Indiana Press, 2021), particularly Chapter 3, “National Identification versus Cultural Affiliation: Non-Russian Composers.”

⁵⁸ Maria Sonevytsky, *Wild Music: Sound and Sovereignty in Ukraine* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2019), 4.

⁵⁹ Brown, *Tchaikovsky: The Man and His Music*, 96. Later, Brown writes: “Obviously Tchaikovsky himself had to extend and supplement the tiny Ukrainian folk tune, and it proves to be merely the launch pad for a substantial ternary structure.”

⁶⁰ Vladimir Putin, “On the Historical Unity of Russians and Ukrainians,” July 12, 2021, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/66181>.

⁶¹ See Michael S. Flier and Andrea Graziosi, “The Battle for Ukrainian: An Introduction,” *Harvard Ukrainian Studies* 35, no. 1–4 (2017–18): 11–30.

⁶² Such attitudes toward Ukrainian were also prevalent in tsarist Russia and throughout much of the Soviet era.

⁶³ Lenore A. Grenoble, *Language Policy in the Soviet Union* (Boston: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 2003), 20.

safeguarding minorities' linguistic rights,"⁶⁴ such a law is hardly evidence of the "genocide" of ethnic Russians in Ukraine, one rationale Putin has offered for Russia's invasion.⁶⁵ In a premature announcement of Russia's military victory in Ukraine published by RIA Novosti, contributor Petr Akopov praised Putin for restoring Russia's "historical fullness, gathering the Russian world, the Russian people together—in its entirety of Great Russians, Belarusians and Little Russians [read: Ukrainians]."⁶⁶ While Putin offered several justifications for the invasion of Ukraine—some profoundly untrue, others simply spurious—the belief that the territory rightfully belongs to Russia and a desire to reunite all ethnic Russians (as Putin understands "Russian" identity) animated the 2022 invasion of Ukraine.⁶⁷

#WeWillROCYou: Tchaikovsky's Concerto as Nationalist Musical Motif

Whatever the nineteenth-century imperial realities that informed the creation of Tchaikovsky's First Piano Concerto, its use as a substitute Russian anthem at the Olympic Games and other international competitions offers it as a symbol of the modern Russian state.⁶⁸ In the summer of 2021, officials, athletes, and musicians completed the process of entrenchment to ensure that the music would be read as Russian. In fact, this was critical to guaranteeing that sports fans and Russian supporters would have no problem seeing through the thin fiction of the state's "neutral" status at the Olympics. This process began obliquely when Russian journalist and social media influencer Tina Kandelaki created the #WeWillROCYou hashtag—a nationalistic social media campaign that cleverly plays on the acronym for the Russian Olympic Committee and the fact that when transliterated from Cyrillic, "ROC" reads "Rus."⁶⁹ Rus, the medieval Slavic state based in the capital of present-day Ukraine, has been framed by both Imperial historians and contemporary Russian nationalists as the predecessor of an indivisible Russian state that encompasses Ukraine and Belarus.⁷⁰ Thus, even this social media campaign buttressed the state's aim to restore an imagined "Russian world."

Music was gradually incorporated into this nationalist campaign. After #WeWillROCYou was promoted by Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov, the campaign was featured prominently in an Instagram video posted by Foreign Ministry spokeswoman Maria Zakharova. In the video, Zakharova is seen boxing with a training dummy labeled "PRESS" before taking questions about the Olympics at a mock press conference. When asked about the substitution of the Russian national anthem with music by Tchaikovsky, Zakharova replies glibly, "We respect our rivals on the pedestal, so let them listen to the

⁶⁴ "Opinion on the Law on Supporting the Functioning of the Ukrainian Language as State Language," European Commission for Democracy through Law (Venice Commission), December 9, 2019. CDL-AD(2019)032.

⁶⁵ Max Fisher, "Putin's Baseless Claims of Genocide in Ukraine Hint at More Than War," *New York Times*, February 20, 2022, A9; Eleanor Beardsley, "Putin claimed Russian-speakers were being killed in Ukraine. Was that true?," *NPR*, March 11, 2022, <https://www.npr.org/2022/03/11/1085979641>.

⁶⁶ Though the article, published just two days after the Russian invasion of Ukraine began, was quickly pulled from RIA Novosti, it is available on the Internet Archive site. Petr Akopov, "Nastuplenie Rossii i novogo mira," RIA Novosti, February 26, 2022, <https://web.archive.org/web/20220226051154/https://ria.ru/20220226/rossiya-1775162336.html>.

⁶⁷ President Putin's irredentism is evident in an address made shortly before the wide-scale invasion of Ukraine, posted with an English-language transcript. "Address by the President of the Russian Federation," February 21, 2022, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/67828>.

⁶⁸ While the Ukrainian musical content itself wasn't played during the Olympics, it is nonetheless quite recognizable musical material that is called to mind simply by hearing the opening measures.

⁶⁹ Tina Kandelaki (@tina_kandelaki), Instagram post, July 18, 2021, <https://www.instagram.com/p/CRelKakpZVY>. Kandelaki's post emphasizes the political dimension of international competition and critiques the WADA ruling before encouraging Russians to support "the national team" using #WeWillROCYou.

⁷⁰ Serhii Plokyh, *The Origins of the Slavic Nations: Premodern Identities in Russia, Ukraine, and Belarus* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 1–2.

classics,”⁷¹ insinuating Russia’s dominance at the Games. The roughly one-and-a-half-minute clip ends with a direct address to Russian athletes: “We love you, we believe in you, we wish you victory. And I want to quote our foreign friends, and all say together, ‘we will rock you.’ From Russia, with love.”

Despite the references to Tchaikovsky’s concerto, when the video cuts to black and #WeWillROCYou appears, it is accompanied by Queen’s “We Will Rock You.”⁷² Given the ubiquity of Queen’s anthem at major sporting events throughout North America and Europe, “We Will Rock You” offers a high-energy soundtrack easily appropriated in support of the ROC. Further, “the role of the sports rock anthems such as ‘We Will Rock You’ . . . directly evokes the relationship to the spectacle surrounding the singing of actual national anthems at sporting events.”⁷³ In place of their own anthem then, Russian state media prepared audiences to make use not only of an alternate musical symbol—Tchaikovsky’s concerto—but also Queen’s stadium rock favorite, now reimagined as a nationalist emblem.

Shortly after the creation of the hashtag, Andrey Leonidovich Shirman, a Russian producer better known as DJ Smash, debuted a mashup of the Queen song and the Tchaikovsky concerto on TikTok. The introduction’s triumphant horn theme is heard eight times against the backdrop of Queen’s “stomp, stomp, clap,” the most recognizable elements of both works presented immediately to the listener. Shirman, in ever-changing ensembles meant to represent Summer Olympic events, walks toward the camera before stomp, stomp, clapping in time with the track. The clip continues by flipping the musical relationship, foregrounding a breathy female voice speak-singing the first verse—“Buddy, you’re a boy, make a big noise playing in the street, gonna be a big man someday”—punctuated by Tchaikovsky’s thunderous orchestral chords. During the verse, Shirman mixes and dances behind an elaborate DJ rig, a pair of black headphones slung around his neck. In the last twenty seconds of the clip, dominated musically by the cover of the Queen chorus, Shirman appears again in costume, pantomiming playing tennis and soccer, boxing, weightlifting, cycling, and horseback riding. The music fades to silence as the video cuts back to Shirman at his rig, arms raised triumphantly, his silver Double G buckle Gucci belt indicating status and wealth just visible beneath his boxy black t-shirt. The overall effect of the video is at odds with the ingenuity of the mashup itself. Shirman’s costumed pantomime seems to highlight his age on a youth-oriented social media platform, and while his movements behind the rig read as contextually appropriate, one feels a shiver of self-consciousness watching him dance dressed as an equestrian and martial artist.

Both Shirman’s performance and the mashup’s unexpected but highly effective blending of Tchaikovsky and Queen evoke Mikhail Bakhtin’s concept of the carnival, TikTok serving as the digital square for active participation and communal engagement.⁷⁴ The caption of this fifty-second clip encouraged DJ Smash’s TikTok followers to engage with the hashtag and create videos featuring the artist’s mashup: “Well, Tiktok, let’s go! We support the #wewillROCYou movement.” Dance videos to this audio by Russian social media influencers—almost entirely young and female—began to appear shortly thereafter, frequently featuring flag emojis, patriotic outfits, and tri-color face paint. Their own captions amplified DJ Smash’s message and encouraged millions of followers to shoot videos to the mashup in support of Russian Olympic athletes, the nationalistic hashtag a prominent feature. As one

⁷¹ Maria Zakharova (@mzakharovamid), “#wewillROCYou,” Instagram video, July 25, 2021, <https://www.instagram.com/p/CRv2jLmozN0>.

⁷² Queen has not, to my knowledge, commented on this use of their work.

⁷³ Ken McLeod, *We Are the Champions: The Politics of Sports and Popular Music* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2011), 128.

⁷⁴ Mikhail Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics*, trans. and ed. Caryl Emerson (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), 122.

Russian outlet declared, “DJ Smash launched a musical flash mob in defense of the Russian national team, and no one can resist his track.”⁷⁵ The chanting, clapping, and stomping “directly reinforce[d] a collective and affirmative sociability” that united Russian spectators and fans despite the prohibitions against Russian national symbols at the Olympics.⁷⁶ This mashup and its rapid dissemination on social media cemented the association between the Tchaikovsky concerto, #WeWillROCYou, Queen’s popular anthem, and Russia’s performance at the 2020 Summer Olympics. As of May 18, 2022, #WeWillROCYou had 450.3 million views on TikTok. Though Brian May’s song was a popular refrain for celebrating ROC’s success at the Olympics, DJ Smash’s mashup as well as Russian state content about the Tchaikovsky concerto like Zakharova’s Instagram video helped to remake the concert hall staple into a nationalist musical motif.



Figure 3: DJ Smash’s #WeWillROCYou Mashup.

Video link: <https://doi.org/10.3998/mp.4570>

⁷⁵ The video has been removed from DJ Smash’s TikTok account but has been archived on several Russian websites, including *Life*. “Yesli ROK—to takoy: DJ Smash zapustil muzykal’nyy fleshmob v zashchitu sbornoy Rossii, i pod yego trek ne ustoit nikto,” *Life*, July 21, 2021, <https://life.ru/p/1410839>.

⁷⁶ McLeod, *We Are the Champions*, 129.

Several sentiments appeared in social media commentary on YouTube and Twitter about the Tchaikovsky concerto serving as Russia’s substitute anthem at the Olympics. Russian users—primarily on Twitter—boasted that despite being denied their anthem and flag, ROC athletes were nonetheless performing strongly. A small contingent on both Twitter and YouTube expressed disappointment at the absence of the Russian anthem; many of them also argued against the legitimacy of sanctions that required an alternative anthem in the first place. A related theme, often shared by journalists and sports commentators, was how strange it was to hear a piano concerto in place of the familiar Russian anthem. Suggestions for alternatives were fairly popular, with the “Internationale,” “Katyusha,” and the USSR’s anthem regularly offered. (Such suggestions were sometimes accompanied by debates over whether the Soviet and present Russian anthems were the same.) The majority of commenters, however, praised the excellence of Tchaikovsky’s concerto. While Russian-language comments typically reflected a sense of pride at hearing the work, some users, mostly English-speaking, suggested that it was an improvement upon the existing Russian anthem, echoing the long history of revisionist discourse around Russia’s anthems explored above.



Figure 4: Social media responses to Tchaikovsky’s Piano Concerto No. 1 as substitute anthem.⁷⁷

⁷⁷ The first comment above, dated February 13, 2022, reads, “Prohibit my anthems and flags/forbid me from wearing a uniform with a coat of arms/forbid me from calling myself Russian/I will still destroy at the Olympics 🇷🇺❤️/with a golden double ❤️🏆.” The second comment, dated February 4, 2022, reads, “Tchaikovsky is playing at the athletes’ parade, I’m crying with pride #Beijing2022.”

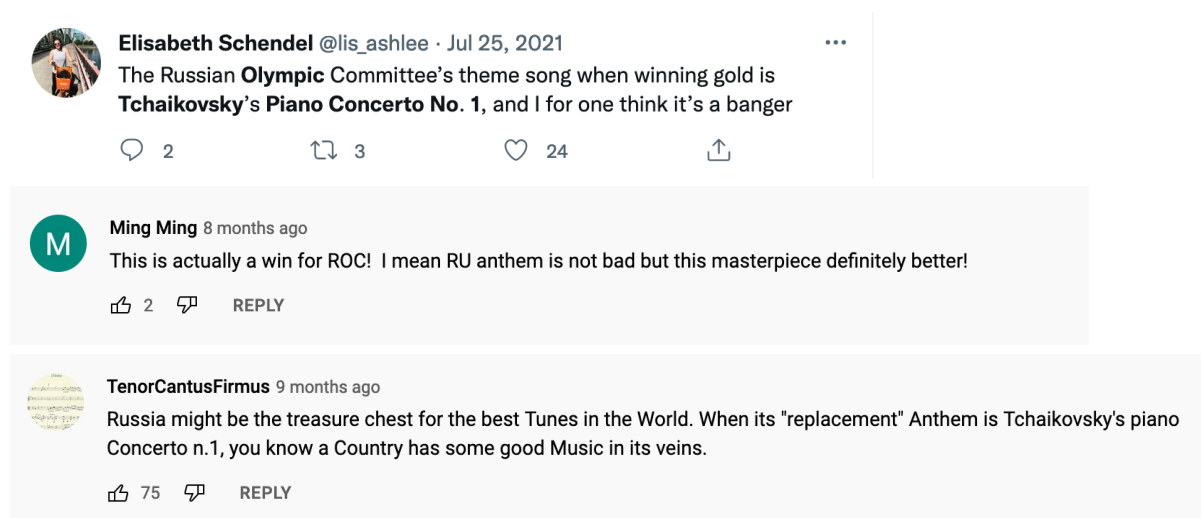


Figure 4 (cont.): Social media responses to Tchaikovsky's Piano Concerto No. 1 as substitute anthem.

In addition to jokes about how the concerto's beauty would only encourage doping and win Russia unexpected fans during the Olympics, these commenters framed the choice of Tchaikovsky in terms of Russia's broader contribution to the classical music canon. Using terms like "backup" and "spare," there was a sense of amazement that this "gem" or "jewel" was available for use as an alternative. Further, they marveled at the abundance of great compositions from which the ROC might have chosen an alternative anthem.

There was another response, albeit infrequent, to the recording of the piano concerto used at the 2020 Tokyo Games that echoed my own feeling upon viewing medal ceremonies: one of bewilderment. In videos from the Summer Games, including a montage of ROC's gold medal moments posted to the Olympics' official YouTube page, the excerpt begins with an inexplicable modulation, as though facilitating a shift from one composition to the Tchaikovsky.⁷⁸ The recording begins with G#-E-D#-C#—a minor third above the notated pitches—before the second and third statements of the memorable horn motif sound as written. Russian pianist Denis Matsuev was tapped to record several versions of the excerpt for use during Victory Ceremonies, though neither the ensemble nor the conductor on the recording are identified by Russian state media or during coverage of the Olympics.⁷⁹ It seems difficult to imagine such precise and limited corruption of a sound file; perhaps this was an attempt to preserve copyright on a recording by Matsuev that would be heard globally, or the result of a rushed recording session in light of how quickly the ROC needed to produce an alternative anthem? Whatever the reason, the error was corrected for the 2022 Winter Games in Beijing, where the three statements of the opening motif were played as notated.

Both Queen's "We Will Rock You" and Tchaikovsky's Piano Concerto No. 1 came to represent the ROC's strong performance at the Summer and Winter Games, no doubt aided by the state-sponsored hashtag and DJ Smash's mashup—but the combination of these two works was not limited to social media. They also served as musical inspiration for an event in Moscow's Red Square welcoming ROC

⁷⁸ "ROC's gold medal moments at #Tokyo2020," Olympics, August 25, 2021, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lvE0Lqq7twM>.

⁷⁹ Olympics Study Center, email to author, June 13, 2022. I received no response to emails sent to the Russian Olympic Committee for additional information about the performers in the recording.

athletes returning home from Tokyo. A video from Match TV showed the Russian team arriving from the airport to the iconic square in two open-topped buses. They are greeted by family—most of whom had been unable to attend the Games because of COVID-19 protocols—along with cheering fans and journalists. During the celebration that followed, a children’s chorus sang the Russian anthem while the tri-colored flag was raised, compensating for the notable absence of these symbols at the Olympics. In an address, Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov invoked the #WeWillROCYou campaign, saying, “There is no doubt that your detractors wanted an evil fate to dominate the Russian Olympic Committee and the Russian national team at the games. This idea failed. And in fact, the hashtag #WeWillROCYou will remain as a symbol of your abilities and desire to win.”⁸⁰

A centerpiece of the festivities was a performance featuring Matsuev and conductor Yuri Bashmet, featuring a mashup of Tchaikovsky and Queen. In the video, Matsuev is seated behind a black Yamaha piano in white tie, an orchestra visible behind him. They play the G \flat major chords of the brief closing section at rehearsal number 31 just before the piano cadenza preceding the coda—suggesting that Matsuev had already played the better part of the concerto’s first movement, including the memorable introduction and the Ukrainian tune that inspired the first movement’s main theme. These G \flat major chords are followed by the horn motif from the concerto’s introduction, Queen’s “stomp, stomp, clap” played by members of a military drum corps marching onstage behind the orchestra. Tchaikovsky’s thunderous chords are barely audible as Matsuev forcefully plays the verse of “We Will Rock You,” mouthing the English words as Russian flags wave behind him. The brass section plays Queen’s chorus while the drum corps performs a choreographed routine, the brightly colored domes of Saint Basil’s Cathedral and the red walls of the Kremlin featured prominently in shots that pan the iconic Moscow square.

The performance, along with the rest of the festivities, makes up for much of the nationalist pomp Russia was denied at the Olympic Games themselves.⁸¹ In comparison to the relatively equal treatment Tchaikovsky’s piano concerto and the Queen song received in DJ Smash’s original mashup, Matsuev’s extended performance of the concerto emphasizes Tchaikovsky’s composition. Of course, the musical focus would naturally shift to the headlining soloist, here a classical pianist. This programming decision, however, also allows the Russian composer greater import than the British rock band (sometimes incorrectly identified in Russian media as an American group), thereby highlighting Russian cultural contributions to high art over those of Western popular music. Further, the addition of a military corps and the choice of Red Square lends a gravity to the proceedings, making it clear that this performance is a state project. In addition to shots that emphasize the location of this nationalist celebration (a popular site for outdoor concerts as well as military parades), footage of the concert often cuts to returning Olympians, some filming the performance and clapping or waving flags in time. Most, however, simply look disinterested or even uncomfortable. Overall, the performance is a bit awkward, the mismatch between Matsuev’s enthusiasm and the muted energy of the crowd palpable to the viewer.

⁸⁰ “Russia: ROC athletes welcomed back from Olympics with reception on Red Square,” *Rutply*, August 10, 2021, <https://www.ruptly.tv/en/videos/20210809-040-Russia-ROC-athletes-welcomed-back-from-Olympics-with-reception-on-Red-Square>.

⁸¹ While the Olympics emphasize international cooperation, they also communicate national power and economic privilege. As Mark Clague notes in his work on the US national anthem, Olympic medal ceremonies are among the most potent opportunities for overtly nationalist demonstrations. Mark Clague, *O Say Can You Hear: A Cultural Biography of “The Star-Spangled Banner”* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2022), 128.

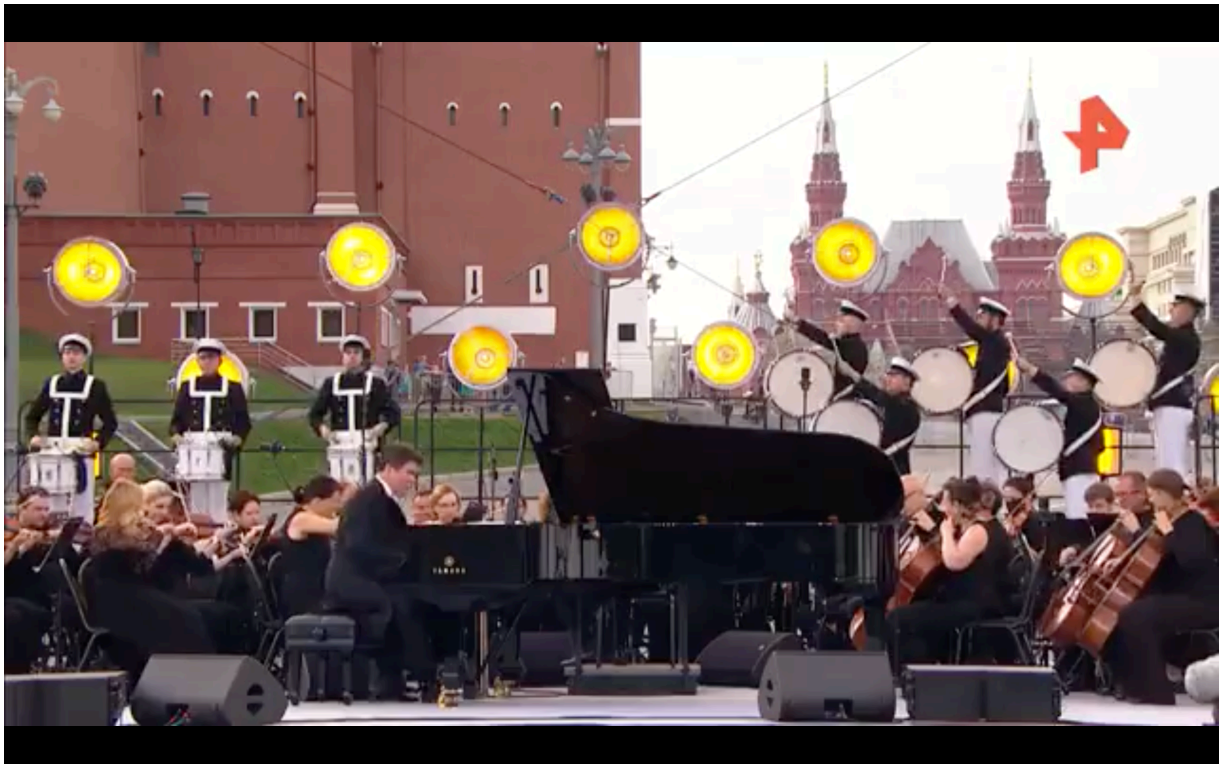


Figure 5: Tchaikovsky-Queen mashup featuring Denis Matsuev and Yuri Bashmet.

Video link: <https://doi.org/10.3998/mp.4570>

Bashmet’s and Matsuev’s participation in this state project is consistent with their public support of Putin’s administration. Like many other Russian artists, both men were signatories on a 2014 petition authored by the Ministry of Culture endorsing Russia’s annexation of Crimea. The four-sentence statement insists that cultural figures cannot remain indifferent observers before asserting that:

Our shared history and shared roots, our culture and its spiritual origins, our fundamental values and language have always united us. We want the commonality of our peoples and our cultures to have a strong future. This is why we firmly declare our support of the position of the President of the Russian Federation with respect to Ukraine and Crimea.⁸²

In response to their support of Crimea’s annexation, both Matsuev and Bashmet faced censure in Ukraine. Bashmet was stripped of his honorary professorship at the Lviv Conservatory,⁸³ which he had attended as a young man, while concert organizers canceled a performance by Matsuev at the National Opera of Ukraine in Kyiv.⁸⁴

Denis Matsuev has proven a particularly active supporter of Putin. A longtime member of the Presidential Council for Culture and Arts, the pianist led the Public Council under the Ministry of

⁸² The petition remains posted on the Ministry of Culture’s website. Total signatories reached 511, though at least one was dead at the time of their ostensible signing and several more denied having signed the document. “Deyateli kul’tury Rossii—v podderzhku pozitsii Prezidenta po Ukraine i Krymu,” <https://culture.gov.ru/press/news/devateli-kulturny-rossii-v-podderzhku-pozitsii-prezidenta-po-ukraine-i-krymu20171009103201/>, updated October 9, 2017.

⁸³ “L’viv’yany zabraly v Bashmeta pochesne zvannya,” *Espresso TV*, March 13, 2014, <https://espresso.tv/news/2014/03/13/lviviany-zabraly-v-bashmeta-pochesne-zvannya>. Espresso TV began operations in November 2013 and broadcast the Euromaiden protests worldwide.

⁸⁴ “U Kyievi skasuvaly koncert Macuyeva,” *Espresso TV*, March 13, 2014, <https://espresso.tv/news/2014/03/13/u-kyievi-skasuvaly-koncert-macuyeva>.

Culture from 2012 to 2017. During Putin’s 2018 presidential campaign, Matsuev was registered with the Central Election Commission of the Russian Federation as a proxy, authorized to campaign on the politician’s behalf.⁸⁵ In 2020, Putin tapped the pianist to be part of a working group to consider proposed changes to Russia’s constitution as his presidency comes to an end after four terms in 2024. Among the possible changes are presidential term limits that prohibit anyone from serving more than two terms, as well as a shift of power to parliament and the prime minister.⁸⁶ While Matsuev’s decision to publicly support Putin does not necessarily indicate agreement with that regime, he has done little if anything to distance himself from the increasingly totalitarian policies of the present administration.

Matsuev and other artists experienced some negative consequences for their support of Putin in the past, but these had largely been limited to small protests and limited performance cancellations. In the wake of Russia’s invasion of Ukraine in 2022, however, Matsuev, conductor Valery Gergiev, and soprano Anna Netrebko were publicly replaced in Western concert appearances. London’s Royal Opera House and New York’s Metropolitan Opera House canceled upcoming performances by the Bolshoi and Mariinsky ballet companies, both of which are subsidized by the Russian state and serve as quasi-national companies. Politically-motivated programming changes have not been limited to the West, however. The Bolshoi Theatre canceled two productions by directors critical of Russia’s invasion of Ukraine: Timofey Kulyabin’s staging of Donizetti’s *Don Pasquale*, and the controversial ballet *Nureyev* by Kirill Serebrennikov about the life of the infamous Soviet dancer and defector.⁸⁷ In place of *Nureyev*, the Bolshoi programmed the 1968 *Spartacus*, a classic of Cold War-era Soviet ballet with a score by Aram Khachaturian; proceeds supported the families of Russian troops killed in Ukraine. Meanwhile, both Kulyabin and Serebrennikov have fled Russia.

As this article has examined, Tchaikovsky has emerged as a particularly contested symbol of state following Russia’s invasion of Ukraine. The composer’s *Marche Slave* and *The Year 1812, Solemn Overture*, along with his Second Symphony (the “Little Russian”) were removed from a concert by the Cardiff Philharmonic Orchestra shortly after the conflict began. When explaining the decision to substitute these works for compositions by Antonín Dvořák, John Williams, and Edward Elgar, the organization cited, in part, the militaristic and nationalistic themes of the Tchaikovsky compositions originally programmed.⁸⁸ While some Western opera houses and ballet companies have continued with long-planned performances, the Théâtre Orchestre Bienne Soleure in Switzerland canceled its production of *Mazeppa*, citing “the current situation in Ukraine,”⁸⁹ and the Prague National Opera canceled its production of *Cherevichki*, explaining that the fairy tale plot is nonetheless set against the backdrop of and promotes the “great Russian empire.”⁹⁰

⁸⁵ Bashmet and conductor Valery Gergiev, among other Russian artists, also served as official proxies for the Putin campaign. “Doverennye litsa,” Putin2018-ru, <http://putin2018.ru/trusted/>, accessed May 26, 2022.

⁸⁶ Gabrielle Tétrault-Farber, “Explainer: How Putin’s shake-up of Russian politics could pan out,” Reuters, January 16, 2020, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-russia-politics-explainer-idUKKBN1ZF1PW>.

⁸⁷ “Russia’s Bolshoi theatre cancels shows by directors who spoke out over Ukraine,” *The Guardian*, May 2, 2022, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/may/02/russia-bolshoi-theatre-cancels-shows-by-directors-who-spoke-out-over-ukraine/>.

⁸⁸ “Cardiff Philharmonic removes Tchaikovsky from programme in light of Russian invasion of Ukraine,” *BBC Music Magazine*, March 9, 2022, <https://www.classical-music.com/news/cardiff-philharmonic-removes-Tchaikovsky-from-programme-in-light-of-russian-invasion-of-ukraine/>.

⁸⁹ Francisco Salazar, “Théâtre Orchestre Bienne Soleure Cancels ‘Mazeppa,’” *Opera Wire*, March 10, 2022, <https://operawire.com/theatre-orchestre-bienne-soleure-cancels-mazeppa/>.

⁹⁰ David Salazar, “Prague National Opera Cancels production of Tchaikovsky’s ‘Cherevichki,’” *Opera Wire*, March 23, 2022, <https://operawire.com/prague-national-opera-cancels-production-of-Tchaikovskys-cherevichki/>.

By all accounts, the Great Russian Empire is precisely what President Putin aims to restore in his invasion of Ukraine. The reestablishment of the Soviet national anthem in 2000, shortly after Putin's first presidential election, presaged the Russian leader's authoritarian politics. Similarly, this article has examined the appropriation of Tchaikovsky's Piano Concerto No. 1 as an irredentist anthem that echoes the present administration's belief that Ukrainian political sovereignty can rightfully be subsumed by Russia. Approved by the CAS because the concerto was not understood as explicitly "Russian," its use at the Olympics and other international competitions has nonetheless offered Tchaikovsky's work as a symbol of the state. But framing Tchaikovsky's concerto as straightforwardly "Russian" marginalizes Ukrainian culture, which has long been deprecated and even legally proscribed in an effort to subordinate the region to Russian rule—whether tsarist, Soviet, or Putinist. The present regime has demonstrated the malleability of musical nationalism and its powerful potential for misuse in its appropriation of Tchaikovsky's concerto. I believe it is our responsibility as music scholars, therefore, to be more attentive to issues of identity and imperialism in our study and teaching of so-called "Russian" music.

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