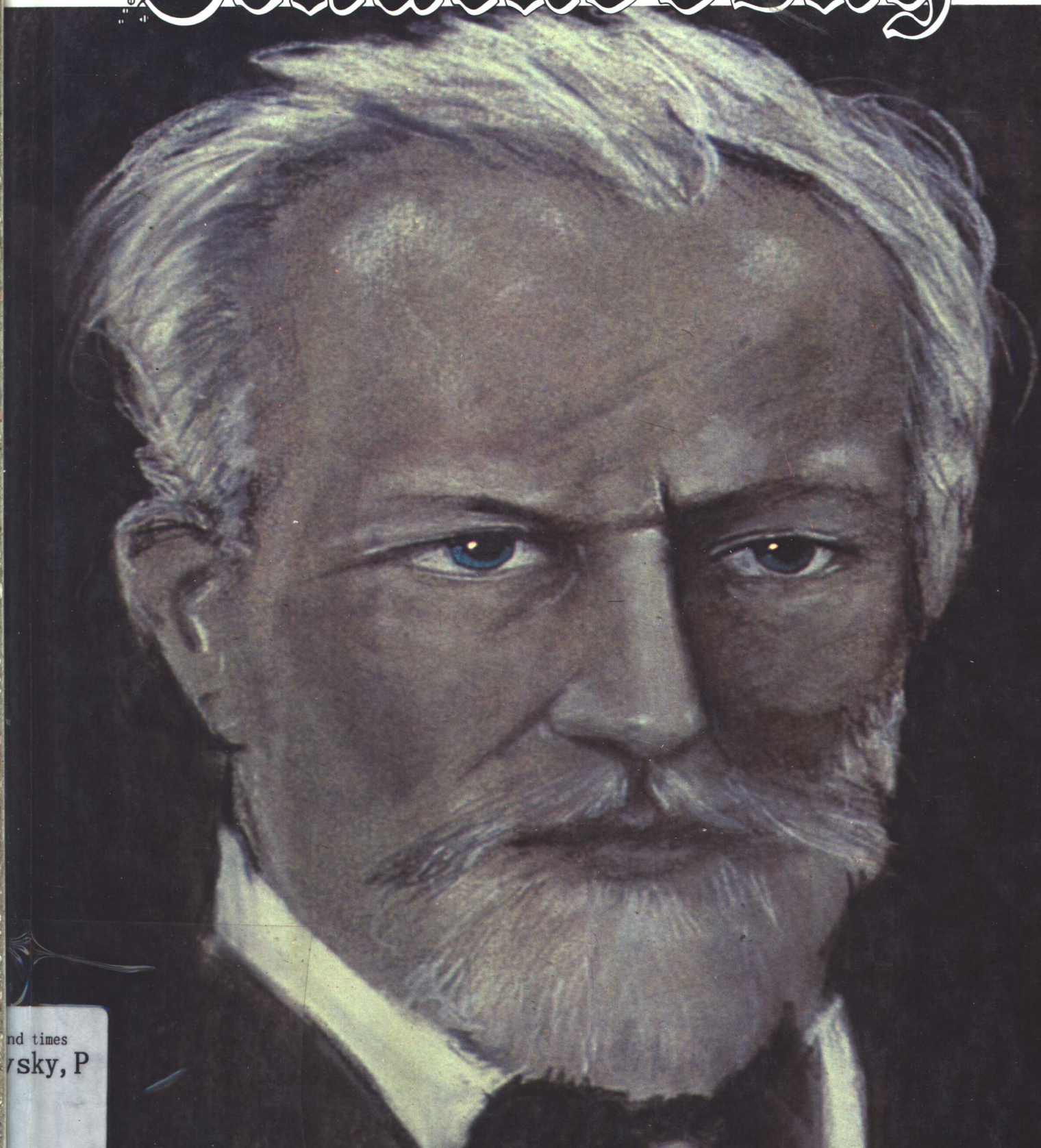


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TCHAIKOVSKY

his life and times

Wilson Strutte



**Paganiniana Publications, Inc.
211 West Sylvania Avenue, Neptune City, N.J. 07753**

To my mother and father and Katie, my sister

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Title page for Tchaikovsky's 1812 Overture

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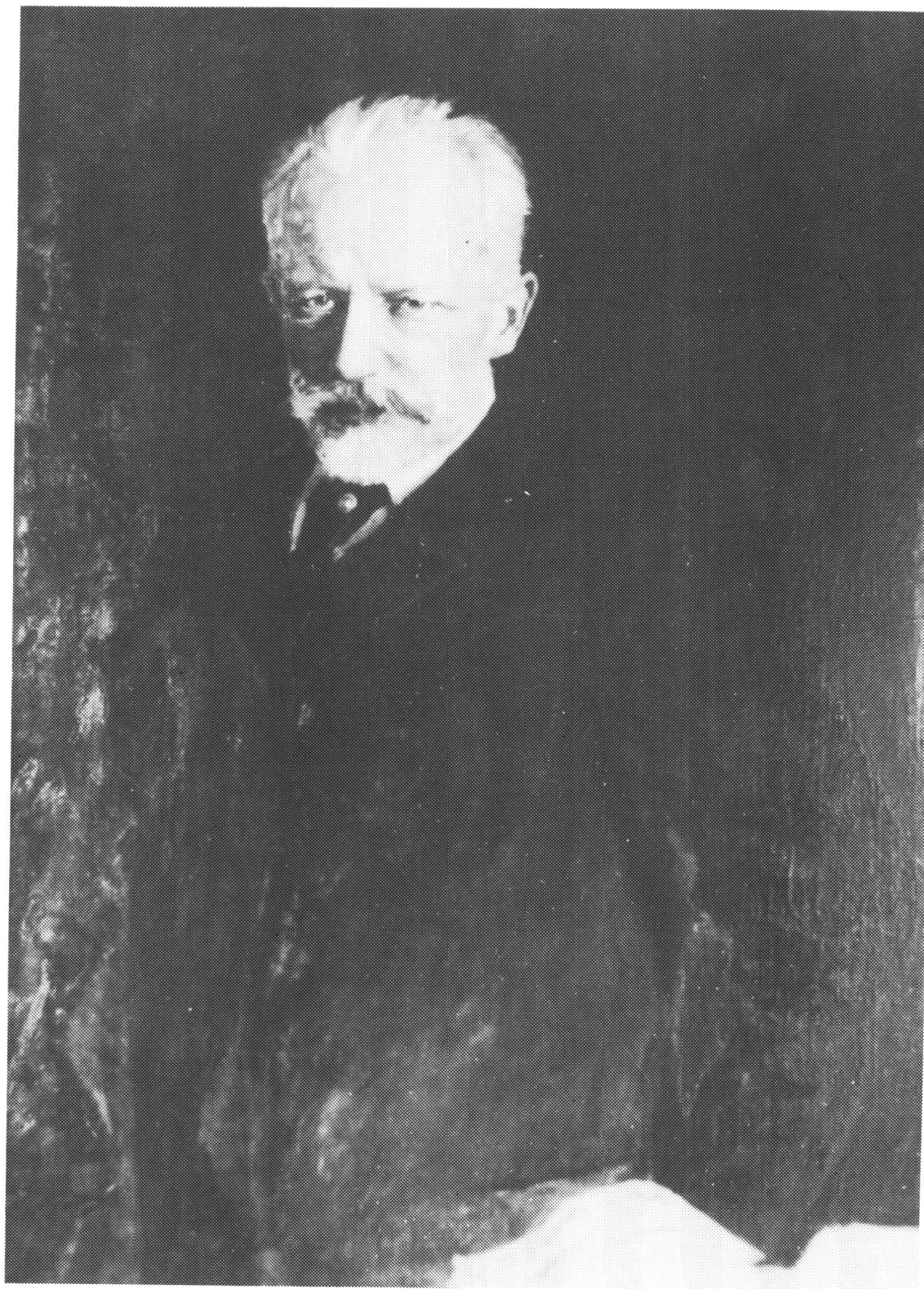
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Posters for concerts of Tchaikovsky's works



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Chapter 1

Genius Aroused

'In you I see the greatest, or rather the only, hope for our musical future' —
Herman Laroche

Whether he cared to admit it or not, Peter Ilyich Tchaikovsky was a hypochondriac, a manic-depressive and a man who, until only a few months before his death, was quite unable to come to terms with his own nature. He was also, quite clearly, a genius; one of the greatest composers ever to have lived, and an artist whose music conveys the very spirit of 19th century Russia. Unlike Mozart or Schubert, he was not an infant prodigy, nor was his family background particularly musical. But from an early age Tchaikovsky's extremely sensitive nature was apparent to those around him, and it was this nature which was later to find expression in some of the most personal and deeply-felt music ever to be committed to paper. As a mature composer he was highly critical of his own work and went out of his way to draw attention to what he considered to be weaknesses in his own music. On more than one occasion during his lifetime he deliberately destroyed entire scores. To this sensitive and self-critical nature a third element must be added: he was fiercely proud of his own nationality. 'I am Russian, *Russian*, in the fullest sense of the word' he once declared, and strenuously resisted any suggestion that his ancestors may have been Polish in origin.

He was born in Votinsk, in the Government of Vyatka, on 7 May 1840, the second child of Ilya Petrovitch Tchaikovsky who was at that time manager of the important Kamsko-Votinsk iron mines, a post which gave him considerable status within the community. By all accounts he was a charming, unassuming man, not particularly gifted or intelligent, but capable and hard-working — all of them qualities one would expect to find in a successful middle-class government official in Russia, as elsewhere. The composer's younger brother, Modest, once described their father's character as 'sympathetic, jovial and straightforward'. In 1833, Ilya had married for the second time and had taken as his wife Alexandra Assier, who came of French Huguenot stock. Her grandfather, like many of his fellow-countrymen, had fled the Revolution and settled in Russia.



Alexandra Assier, the
Composer's mother

Alexandra's father, André Assier, was a state councillor of some distinction, although he was by nature a nervous and impulsive man. Both characteristics lend substance to the view that there was a history of epilepsy in Alexandra's family, and it is known that her grandfather actually suffered epileptic fits from time to time. At the time of her marriage she was 20 years old and has been described as 'tall and distinguished; not precisely handsome, but with wonderfully expressive eyes'. Educated at a girls' orphanage, she spoke both French and German fluently and was a pianist and singer of moderate ability. These modest accomplishments were quite normal for girls of her social class at that time, and it would be mistaken to assume that they had any direct bearing on young Peter's own musical development. We do know, however, that he was deeply attached to his mother and that she had a very profound influence on her son during his early years.

When he was four years old, Tchaikovsky's mother decided to engage a governess for her niece Lydia, who lived with the family, and her eldest son Nikolay. Her choice fell on a young French girl, Fanny Durbach, and as soon as she took up her duties, Peter, already a 'winning and precociously intelligent child', insisted on sharing all the lessons, although this had not been his mother's original intention. Peter seems to have received more than his fair share of Fanny's attention and affection, although this was perhaps inevitable as he was by far the youngest of her charges. At all events, she has left valuable recollections of Tchaikovsky's early childhood: his clothes, we are told, were

always in disorder. Either he had stained them in his absent-mindedness, or buttons were missing, or his hair was only half-brushed.



Illya Petrovitch
Tchaikovsky, the
Composer's father

Fanny herself was not in the least musical, and she did her best to restrict the amount of time the boy spent at the piano, and to encourage his early attempts at literature. Of his academic ability, and of his temperament, she has this to say:

At lessons no child was more industrious or quicker to understand; in playtime none was so full of fun . . . his sensitivity was extreme, therefore I had to be very careful how I treated him. A trifle wounded him deeply. He was as brittle as porcelain. With him there would be no question of punishment: the least criticism or reproof of a kind that would pass lightly over other children would upset him alarmingly . . .

On one occasion, during his recreation hour, Fanny found young Peter turning over the pages of his atlas. Coming to a map of Europe, he smothered Russia with kisses and spat on all the other



The house in Votinsk where
Tchaikovsky was born

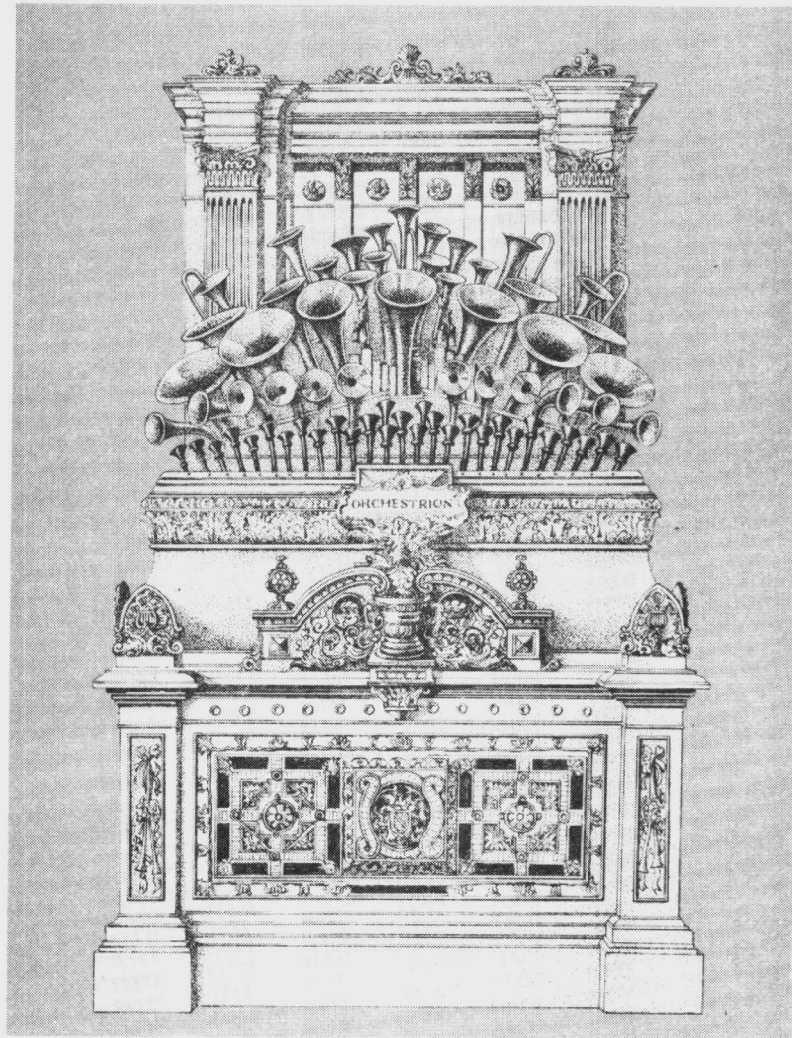
countries. Fanny, who was clearly a level-headed and sensible girl, describes what followed:

When I told him he ought to be ashamed of such behaviour, that it was wicked to hate his fellow men . . . and that he was spitting on his own Fanny, who was a Frenchwoman, he replied at once: "There is no need to scold me. Didn't you see me cover France with my hand first?"

'As our leisure hours were few, I insisted on devoting them to physical exercise. But often I met with some opposition from Pierre, who would go straight from his lessons to the piano. Otherwise, he was obedient and generally enjoyed romping with his sisters. Left to himself, he preferred to play the piano, or to read and write poetry.

Fanny's attempts to moderate her pupil's enthusiasm for music could not have been made easier by the presence in the household not only of a piano, but also a remarkable instrument known as an orchestrion. This consisted of a large number of organ pipes of various lengths and sizes, designed to represent the instruments of an orchestra, which were controlled either by pinned cylinders as in a conventional musical box, or by perforated paper rolls. Tchaikovsky himself acknowledged that 'he owed his first musical impressions to this instrument' and, in particular, his 'passionate worship' of Mozart, arias from whose *Don Giovanni* were to be

Orchestrions, which consisted of an elaborate series of organ pipes worked either by pinned cylinders or perforated rolls, were designed to imitate the instruments of an orchestra



found in the collection of mechanical music, as well as selections from the works of Bellini, Donizetti and Rossini. With his remarkable ear, he was able to pick out with great accuracy on the piano tunes that he had heard on the orchestrion, and not long after his fifth birthday it was decided to engage a piano tutor to give him more formal musical instruction. Her name was Maria Markovna Palchikova, of whom nothing is known except that she was a freed serf. Within three years, Tchaikovsky was able to sight-read as well as his young tutor.

We learn from Fanny that music always excited and unsettled the boy. One night, after a party in the house, she found him sitting up in bed, his eyes feverishly bright, crying 'Oh, this music, this music! Save me from it!' In an attempt to calm him, Fanny explained that the music had long since stopped and that the house

was now completely quiet. 'It is here, it is here,' he replied, pointing at his head. 'I can't get rid of it: it won't leave me in peace.'

In the words of the late M. D. Calvocoressi, Fanny Durbach 'exercised a wholesome influence upon Tchaikovsky's excitable and morbidly sensitive disposition'. Her teaching ability was also of a high order, because by the age of six Peter could speak both French and German fluently. Undoubtedly his mother also played her part in this early linguistic achievement, but the fact remains that in Fanny Durbach she had made an excellent choice of governess for her young family. But unhappily — perhaps disastrously — for young Peter, the affection and the sense of security which she was able to provide were soon to come to an abrupt end.

In 1848, Tchaikovsky's father, who now enjoyed a rank equivalent to that of a major-general, decided to resign from government service in order to take up a new, more lucrative and — as it turned out — totally illusory appointment in Moscow. The loyal and devoted Fanny was dismissed, and on September 26 the uprooted family set out from Votinsk only to discover, on their arrival in Moscow twelve days later, that the coveted post had been snatched from Ilya Petrovitch by an unscrupulous friend. To make matters worse, cholera was raging in the city, and it was decided immediately to take the family on to St Petersburg, where both Nikolay and Peter were sent to a fashionable boarding school. Here they were teased as country yokels, and their unsympathetic teachers worked them to an absurdly excessive extent. To add to their misery, both boys quickly succumbed to a measles epidemic.

Nikolay made a normal recovery but Peter, distressed by his strange new surroundings and the loss of Fanny's care and attention, appeared not to respond to medical treatment. His condition was diagnosed by the doctor as 'spinal brain' disease, and a complete rest of at least six months was prescribed. Meanwhile, Ilya Petrovitch had found himself a suitable post as manager of some private mines not far from the Siberian border, at Alapayesk and Nizhny-Nevyansk. Once again the family was uprooted and all except Nikolay, for whom it had been decided that he should stay at the boarding school in St Petersburg, set off for their new, remote home beyond the Urals.

During this period of upheaval and change, Tchaikovsky's education had been left in the uncertain hands of his half-sister Zinaida, herself little more than a child. For a short time the services of a piano tutor, Filippov, were engaged, but the lessons were quickly abandoned when the boy fell ill. Now, in addition to all the feelings of insecurity and bewilderment brought about by the constant changes of plan and movement from place to place, Peter had to endure pangs of separation from his brother Nikolay, to whom he

Fanny Durbach



The Tchaikovsky Family in 1848 (the Composer is standing next to his mother on the far left)



was devoted. Small wonder that despite a steady improvement in his physical condition, he grew increasingly morose, irritable and — much to his mother's annoyance and concern — lazy. 'He has grown idle, learns nothing and often makes me cry with vexation', she wrote to Fanny Durbach, who was now happily settled in another post.

Matters improved towards the end of 1849 with the appointment of a new governess, Anastasia Petrova, under whose careful supervision Peter resumed his studies with growing enthusiasm. In a further report to Fanny Durbach, his mother declared that he was 'becoming more reasonable'. To see her son slowly regaining his earlier composure while remaining highly introverted and self-preoccupied, must have been a considerable relief to Peter's mother, who soon had other matters to attend to. In May 1850 she gave birth to twin boys, who were christened Anatol and Modest: 'angels descended to earth' as Peter described them in a letter to Fanny Durbach. Despite the difference in their ages, Modest was to become Tchaikovsky's most devoted confidant in later years.

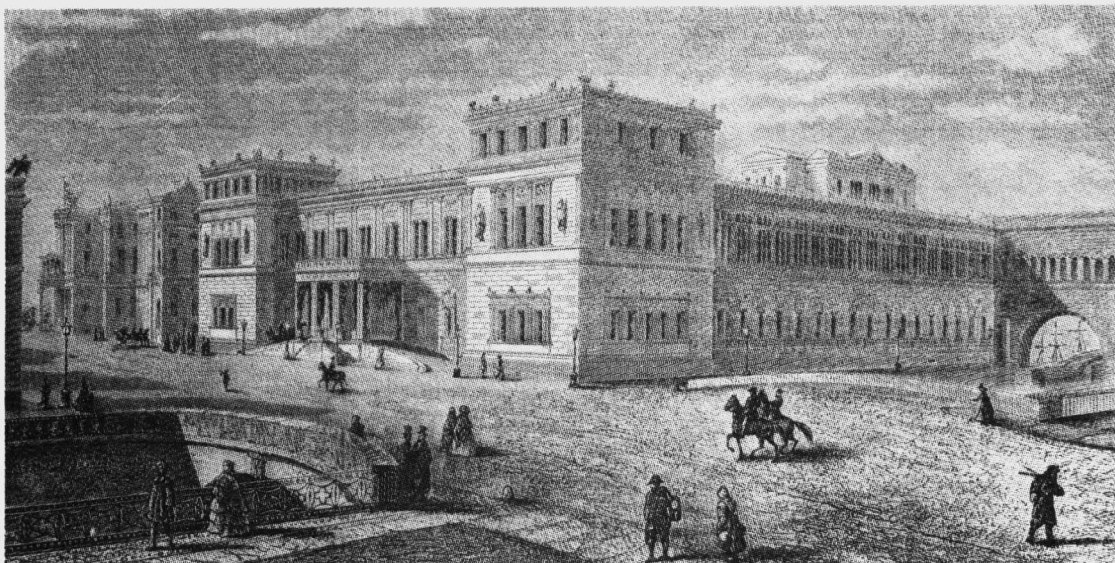
Shortly after the arrival of his twin brothers, it was decided that Peter should resume his formal education, this time at the preparatory department of the School of Jurisprudence in St. Petersburg. He was entered as a boarder, and as the family home was such a vast distance from the capital his mother arranged with old friends, Modest Alekseyevich Vakar and his wife, that they should act as

Peter's guardians during his stay in the city. In October 1850 Peter and his mother set off on their long journey to St. Petersburg where, as a special treat, she took him to a performance of Glinka's *A Life for the Tsar*, which made a profound impression on him. The carefully-laid plans seemed to be working smoothly, but when the time came for Peter's mother to return home he was overcome by grief and hysteria. It was a painful and terrifying experience which was to remain with him for the rest of his life, as his brother Modest records:

When the actual moment of parting came he completely lost his self-control and, clinging wildly to his mother, refused to let her go. Neither kisses nor words of comfort nor the promise to return soon were of any avail. He saw nothing, heard nothing, but hung upon her as though he was part and parcel of her beloved presence. It became necessary to carry off the poor child by force and to hold him fast until his mother had driven away. Even then he broke loose and, with a cry of despair, ran after the carriage and clung to one of the wheels as though he would bring the vehicle to a standstill. To his life's end Tchaikovsky could never recall this hour without a shiver of horror.

Moscow in 1848





The Hermitage in
St. Petersburg

But that horror was not to end even there. Within a month, scarlet fever broke out at Peter's school and Vakar took him in at once to stay with his family until it was safe to return. A few days later, Vakar's eldest son caught the infection and died on November 24. Peter himself escaped, and although the bereaved family did everything in their power to assure him that he was in no way responsible for the tragedy, he was overcome by guilt and remorse, and begged his parents to remove him from the house. They wisely insisted on his returning to school as soon as the outbreak had run its course.

Unhappy, depressed and homesick as he undoubtedly was, Peter responded to the routine of the school and made good progress in his studies throughout the following year. In May 1852, Ilya Petrovitch retired, and with the help of a government pension and his own modest savings he was able to move his family once again, this time out of near exile beyond the Urals to the warmth and gaiety of St. Petersburg itself. Tchaikovsky was overjoyed to be reunited with his family, and there was further cause for rejoicing when the results of his entrance examination for the School of Jurisprudence were published. He had done extremely well, and in high spirits the whole Tchaikovsky family spent a happy and delightful holiday that summer on a country estate not far from St. Petersburg.

At the start of the new academic year Tchaikovsky took up his place in the senior school, where he quickly made new friends. Among them was the future poet Alexander Apukhtin, who was to provide him with numerous texts and verses over the years, and Vladimir Adamov, a great lover of music who became a senior

official in the Ministry of Justice. Peter continued to do moderately well at his studies at the School of Jurisprudence despite the fact that the course of instruction placed more emphasis, not unnaturally, on the development of literary rather than of musical ability.

For eighteen months or more, Peter's life was far happier and more tranquil than it had been at any time since the first, disastrous family uprooting and the departure of Fanny Durbach. But in July 1854 came another shattering blow. Tchaikovsky's mother contracted cholera and died. The effect of this disaster on the fourteen-year-old boy can only be surmised, for there are no letters or writings of any kind from Tchaikovsky himself — at least, none appears to have survived. It was only some two and a half years after the event that he could bring himself to write to Fanny Durbach:

Four months after Zinaida's marriage my mother was taken ill with cholera. Thanks to the care of her doctor she rallied, but not for long. Three days later she was taken from us without even time to bid us goodbye.

Tchaikovsky wrote his first known composition the month following his mother's death: *Valse dédiée a m-lle Anastasia* for his former governess.

During that same summer he had also considered writing a one-act opera *Hyperbole* to a libretto by the poet Olkhovsky, but the project came to nothing. With one or two exceptions, his friends were not particularly musical, although he was from time to time encouraged by his aunt to play and to sing. By all accounts he had an extremely fine singing voice, and she put before him much of the popular operatic music of the day together with a full vocal score of *Don Giovanni*. Many years later, in 1878, Tchaikovsky wrote:

The music of *Don Giovanni* was the first to make a deep impression on me. It awoke a spiritual ecstasy which was afterwards to bear fruit. With its help I penetrated into that world of artistic beauty where only great genius abides. It is due to Mozart that I have devoted my life to music. He gave me the impulse to all my efforts, and made me love it above all else in the world.

At the School of Jurisprudence Peter was able to study singing under Lomakin, and the piano with Bekker. He also received lessons from Kundinger, an eminent German pianist who had made his home in St. Petersburg. Although he was impressed by his pupil's gift for improvisation, Kundinger advised Ilya Petrovitch not to allow his son to follow a musical career: