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## Clearing a Misunderstanding: Rehearing Tchaikovsky's Violin Concerto (1878) with the "Changing Background" Technique

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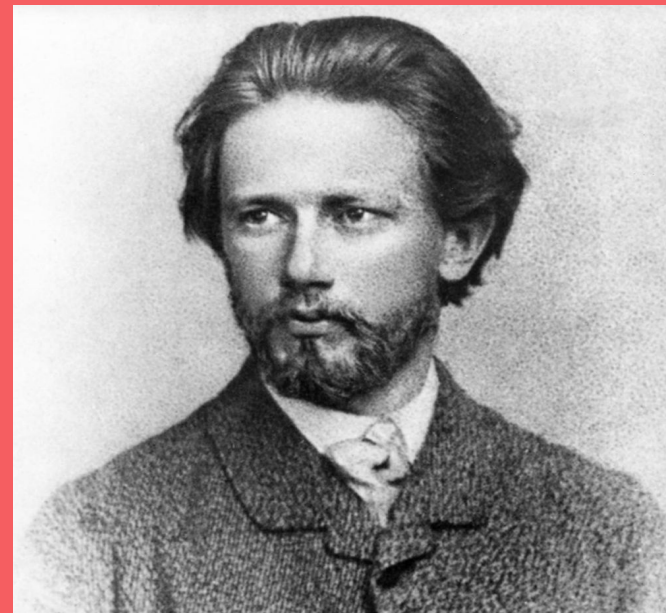
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# Clearing a Misunderstanding: Rehearing Tchaikovsky's Violin Concerto (1878) with the "Changing Background" Technique

Valparaiso University Symposium on  
Undergraduate Research and  
Creative Expression (Source)

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# Research Question

How does hearing Tchaikovsky's Violin Concerto (2nd movement) in terms of Russian structural paradigms (instead of Austro-Germanic ones), including the "Changing Background Technique", help us understand its early reception?

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How does hearing Tchaikovsky's Violin Concerto (2nd movement) in terms of Russian structural paradigms (instead of Austro-Germanic ones), including the "Changing Background Technique", help us understand its early reception?

## Subquestion:

Is it possible that the concerto was misunderstood at its premiere because it was measured by Austro-German, instead of Russian technical standards?

# Context

- Composed in 1878 in presence of, and helped by, Yosif Kotek
- Premiered in 1881 in Vienna (Adolf Brodsky)
- Dedication disaster
- First review disaster

*“The Russian composer Tchaikovsky is an inflated [talent], without discrimination or taste. Such is also his long and pretentious Violin Concerto. [...] But soon vulgarity gains the upper hand. The violin is no longer played; it is pulled, torn, shredded. The [second movement] Adagio is on its best behavior. But it breaks off to make way for a finale that transfers us to the brutal and wretched jollity of a Russian holiday. We see plainly the savage, vulgar faces; we hear curses, we smell vodka.” - E. Hanslick*



# Literature Review

James Hepokoski,  
“Issues of  
Meaning in Music”

Historical “life and works”  
sources, which discuss the  
early reception of  
Tchaikovsky’s concerto

Tchaikovsky’s letters  
and other primary  
sources, including  
reviews, that throw  
light on the premiere.

Sources on  
Russian  
Nationalism and  
the “Changing  
Background”  
technique.

# Method

- Russian Nationalism Technique: “Changing Background” Technique

# Method

- Russian Nationalism Technique: “Changing Background” Technique
- Rooted in composer Mikhail Glinka, “father of Russian Nationalism”



# Definition of “Changing Background” Technique

- Variation form first used by Mikhail Glinka
- modular, nondevelopmental repetition



*Kamarinskaya*  
(Orchestral Fantasy,  
1848)

## Analysis: “Changing Background” Technique: m. 13-19; 20-27

- Opening theme in strings and French horn, echoed by the clarinet
- Theme has an internal repetition, breaks down into 4 measures antecedent, and 4 measures consequent (both start the same way).

“Changing background” technique: second time (m. 20-27) the accompaniment goes from dotted half notes to quarter and eighth notes, in other words, it uses *rhythmic diminution*.

# Analysis: “Changing Background” Technique: m. 13-19; 20-27

## Example 1

Violin *Adagio*  $\text{♩} = 60$

Piano *Adagio*  $\text{♩} = 60$   
strings  
horn

Measures 13-19. The Violin part features a melodic line with a trill in measure 15 and a quintuplet in measure 16. The Piano accompaniment includes strings and a horn part.

Violin

Piano horn cl.

Measures 18-27. The Violin part continues the melodic line. The Piano accompaniment includes horn and clarinet parts.

## Example 2

Vln.

Pno.

Measures 22-27. The Violin part features a trill in measure 25 and a quintuplet in measure 26. The Piano accompaniment includes strings and a horn part.

Vln.

Pno.

Measures 26-27. The Violin part features a trill in measure 26. The Piano accompaniment includes strings and a horn part.

## Analysis: “Changing Background” Technique: m. 69-76; 77-84

- Clarinet and flute take the moving theme while strings use pizzicato within the first four measures (mm. 69-73).
- In the second four measures it is only the clarinet that plays the countermelody with the solo violin.
- Tchaikovsky also takes the solo violinist up an octave in mm. 77-84.

“Changing background” technique: Tchaikovsky uses broken rhythms for the clarinet and flute in his first theme and a continuous rhythm with just the clarinet for the repetition; this change of background creates the illusion that a lot has changed, although the changes were, in fact, subtle.

# Analysis: “Changing Background” Technique: m. 69-76; 77-84

## Example 2

69

Vln.

Pno.

trww

5

Detailed description: This block shows the first system of the musical score, covering measures 69 to 76. The Violin (Vln.) part is in the upper staff, starting with a half note G4, followed by quarter notes A4, B4, and C5, then a trill (trww) over a five-note chromatic scale (D5, C5, B4, A4, G4). The Piano (Pno.) part is in the lower staff, featuring a complex rhythmic pattern with eighth and sixteenth notes, and a five-note chromatic scale (D5, C5, B4, A4, G4) in the right hand, while the left hand plays a steady bass line of quarter notes.

77

Vln.

Pno.

pizz.

cl.

5

Detailed description: This block shows the second system of the musical score, covering measures 77 to 84. The Violin (Vln.) part is in the upper staff, starting with a half note G4, followed by quarter notes A4, B4, and C5, then a trill (trww) over a five-note chromatic scale (D5, C5, B4, A4, G4). The Piano (Pno.) part is in the lower staff, featuring a complex rhythmic pattern with eighth and sixteenth notes, and a five-note chromatic scale (D5, C5, B4, A4, G4) in the right hand, while the left hand plays a steady bass line of quarter notes. The piano part includes a 'pizz.' (pizzicato) marking and a 'cl.' (clarinet) marking.

73

Vln.

Pno.

trww

Detailed description: This block shows the third system of the musical score, covering measures 73 to 80. The Violin (Vln.) part is in the upper staff, starting with a half note G4, followed by quarter notes A4, B4, and C5, then a trill (trww) over a five-note chromatic scale (D5, C5, B4, A4, G4). The Piano (Pno.) part is in the lower staff, featuring a complex rhythmic pattern with eighth and sixteenth notes, and a five-note chromatic scale (D5, C5, B4, A4, G4) in the right hand, while the left hand plays a steady bass line of quarter notes.

81

Vln.

Pno.

trww

3

Detailed description: This block shows the fourth system of the musical score, covering measures 81 to 84. The Violin (Vln.) part is in the upper staff, starting with a half note G4, followed by quarter notes A4, B4, and C5, then a trill (trww) over a five-note chromatic scale (D5, C5, B4, A4, G4). The Piano (Pno.) part is in the lower staff, featuring a complex rhythmic pattern with eighth and sixteenth notes, and a five-note chromatic scale (D5, C5, B4, A4, G4) in the right hand, while the left hand plays a steady bass line of quarter notes.

# Conclusion