

TCHAIKOVSKY'S 'PATHÉTIQUE' SYMPHONY FIRST MOVEMENT: VIOLA PART

ROGER BENEDICT presents some practical tips for violists on how to prepare one of the standard audition pieces in the orchestral repertoire



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Tchaikovsky considered his sixth and last symphony to be his finest and most sincere work. He set out to compose a programmatic symphony but insisted that the programme was so intensely personal that it should remain an enigma. The title 'Pathétique' was

suggested to him by his dramatist-librettist brother Modest.

The sombre opening, with a dark-toned solo bassoon above divided double basses, sets the tone of the whole work. Tchaikovsky said that the symphony 'is imbued with a spirit very close to that that also infuses a requiem', and in fact the first movement contains a note-for-note quotation from the Russian Orthodox Office for the Dead.

[1] Opening of the first movement

Adagio

ADAGIO INTRODUCTION

The violas are divided into two parts for the first 41 bars of the movement. I always prefer to divide these parts unevenly until bar 30, in order to give the most important line enough weight. In a section of twelve players, I would have the front seven players playing the top line, the rear five the lower, and then normal at-the-desk divisi from bar 30. It is easier to blend the sound (especially in the exposed bars 22 and 23) when the players are seated close to each other. For an audition, you would normally be expected to prepare the top line only.

Bassoonists often play their long phrases in this introduction in one breath, and they don't appreciate the violas taking too much time over the up-beats to bars 5 and 11 (example 1). Neither do conductors – even though there is a natural tendency to wait. The dotted rhythm in bars 15 and 16 should be played slightly separated,

as if marked *parlando*, maybe suggesting the chanting of the Russian Orthodox cantor – but try not to bulge on the minims (♩) in these bars.

At the end of the introduction, at bar 17, Tchaikovsky indicates a *ritenuto*. Throughout this work he differentiates quite specifically between *ritardando* (becoming gradually slower) and *ritenuto* (holding back, or suddenly slower), and it is important to the character of the work to be aware of the difference (see especially bars 95–6 and 315–16). So in bar 17 we mustn't let the music grind to a halt before the bar-line, but merely hold these two bars in a steadier tempo. The effect is then more noble than sentimental.

One could say that all these things are purely the responsibility of the conductor, but I believe in collective musical responsibility. Morgan Scott Peck, the American psychiatrist who wrote much about group dynamics, said that in a perfect community 'there is a group of

[2] From the beginning of the Allegro non troppo at bar 19, showing block fingerings

Allegro non troppo

The score shows two staves in G major, 2/4 time. The first staff has a treble clef and the second a bass clef. Fingerings are indicated by numbers 1-4 above notes. Dynamic markings include *p* and *p* with a less-than sign (<). There are also some bracketed markings under the notes.

[3] Bar 40

The score shows a single staff in G major, 2/4 time. It starts with a *mf* dynamic and a *p* dynamic. A *saltando* passage is marked with a square symbol above a note. The passage ends with *pp* and "etc".

[4] Bar 50

The score shows a single staff in G major, 2/4 time. It features complex fingerings (1-4) and a slurred passage. The passage ends with "etc".

[5] Slurring the passage from bar 50 for practice

The score shows a single staff in G major, 2/4 time. The passage from bar 50 is slurred for practice. It ends with "etc".

[6] Bar 63

The score shows a single staff in G major, 2/4 time. It features dynamic markings like *p* and fingerings. The passage ends with "etc".

all leaders. It is the spirit of community itself that leads and not any single individual.' This would be the perfect orchestra.

ALLEGRO NON TROPPO

The first few bars of this allegro (example 2) are famously awkward to play well. I like to have all the top-line players playing on the D string at the beginning, in order to avoid an edgy sound and to blend well with the timbre of the lower violas and the divided cellos. I also suggest playing the opening phrases in the upper half of the bow, on the string, the quavers (♪) again rather *parlando*.

Intonation is difficult, with contrary motion in the cello and viola parts; be especially aware in the upper violas of the C-sharp unison with the first cellos, and in the lower violas of the A-sharp unison with the second cellos, and that the chord on the first beat of bars 20 and 21 is a diminished 7th. The more aware you are of the harmonic context, the more in tune you will play. It helps to place fingers down in blocks and leave them down – as shown in example 2, where the uppermost fingerings represent the sounding notes, and the others are to be held down simultaneously.

It helps both ensemble and intonation if you subtly shape the semiquaver (♪) passage dynamically – as marked in brackets –

and if you are aware of the figure passing between the flute and the violas.

Saving bow on the tied notes (rather than retaking the bow) in bars 40 and 41 (example 3) helps to avoid the following semiquavers starting late. For the saltando passage starting at bar 42, it is important to keep the gently bounced semiquavers really even and not too fast. Later, at bar 101, when this passage is repeated, the semiquavers can be less 'straight' as the character here is more relaxed.

The passage from bar 50 can be hard to play evenly (example 4). To practise it, first play *détaché* on the string, making sure you prepare string-crossings in the left hand by placing fingers down early and swinging the elbow inwards as you go towards the lower strings. And by practising the passage slurred (example 5), the left-hand 'rhythm' becomes clearer. It can also be practised in dotted rhythms, or silently without the bow. We often confuse left- and right-hand rhythms, and it is helpful to isolate them. Use a metronome beating quavers.

Half position is useful in the passage from bar 63 (example 6), where it is important to be aware of the dialogue with the wind section. The entries tend to be late after the rest, and the quavers can drag.

Tchaikovsky's original bowing at bar 130 (example 7) is often reversed, much to my frustration! The down-bow crescendos give >

[7] Bar 130

Andante

[8] The beginning of the Allegro vivo at bar 161

Allegro vivo

[9] Bar 171

[10] Bar 305

Andante

the passage a much more soulful expression, and I am sure the composer was well aware of the effect that this somewhat more effortful bowing would have. Remember the meaning of the 'riten.' marking in, for example, bars 136–7; musicians tend to treat all 'rit.' markings the same way without stopping to consider what the composer intended.

At bar 154, we are asked to accompany the clarinet *ppp*. Bear in mind, though, that six bars later the dynamic is *ppppp*. Pity the bassoonist who then has to end the phrase *ppppp*! (It is often played by the bass clarinet to achieve the quietest sound.) Tchaikovsky always demands extreme dynamics – he asks for *ffff* from us later in the movement – but I think these don't just indicate decibel levels but real extremes of expression and character. The character of a forte is very different from that of a fortissimo – it isn't just about loudness. We need to vary articulation, attack and bow stroke to achieve the differences.

ALLEGRO VIVO

At the beginning of the Allegro vivo (example 8), the third-beat sforzandos do work on up bows, but you need to throw the bow at the string to make them electrifying.

At bar 171 the *feroce* (ferocious) character is achieved by digging into the string with a forceful *détaché* for the semiquavers (example 9). The entry is often a little late after the rest, so really bounce off the violins' up-beat quavers rather than react to the down-beat (as the reaction will be too slow) and have the bow on or near the string, ready. The length of the quavers from bar 173 is always discussed. Generally they are slightly shortened as if marked with both a dot and a tenuto, but they should get longer in bar 189

to match the winds, who have slurs. It is helpful to practise this passage slurring two beats to a bow, and in dotted rhythms for clarity and coordination.

The passage at bar 240 is worth practising slowly for intonation, and by placing fingers down in groups as described above. Observe which notes are created by lifting rather than by placing fingers, and make sure they lift quickly and cleanly. When it is difficult to hear whether you are playing in tune in the orchestra, as in this passage, it is important to have as strong a physical connection to intonation as possible (playing more by feel than by ear), and to get into good fingering habits within a well-structured hand position. In unison passages such as this (the violins are one and two octaves above the violas) it is easy to become approximate, but the resulting sound of twelve violas or even forty violins and violas playing slightly out of tune is unimpressive, losing the clarity and urgency that is so needed.

Another place where careless intonation can be audible is in the passage from bar 305 (example 10), where violas and cellos play an octave apart. It is partly compromised by the repeated demisemiquavers (♩), so also practise it as single notes, slurred in groups of four.

Many people think of Tchaikovsky's orchestral music as rather overblown and bombastic. They fail to appreciate the incredible care with which he marked his scores and the elegance and charm that complements the passion and vitality we associate with him. I always like to remember that Mozart was Tchaikovsky's favourite composer and a constant model for him. The Sixth Symphony is perfectly balanced, subtle and original, and in spite of having played it hundreds of times I never cease to find something new in it. ■