

# Queering Musical Biography in the Writings of Edward Prime-Stevenson and Rosa Newmarch

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In her introduction to a memorial anthology of essays by the late Britten scholar Philip Brett, Susan McClary comments that the title of the groundbreaking anthology *Queering the Pitch: The New Gay and Lesbian Musicology* (coedited by Brett, Elizabeth Wood, and Gary C. Thomas in 1994) contains a touch of humor about the supposedly recent history of queer musicology. She notes “the implication in the subtitle that there was an *old* gay and lesbian musicology—as, of course, there *was*, even if it dared not speak its name.”<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Susan McClary, “Introduction: Remembering Philip Brett,” in Philip Brett, *Music and Sexuality in Britten: Selected*

McClary’s essay, of course, makes a broader point about Brett’s contributions to the field and the risks that he, Wood, and Thomas took through their scholarship and formative work with the Gay and Lesbian Study Group (now the LGBTQ Study Group) of the American Musicological Society, insisting that sexuality and gender were and are vital lenses through which to talk about the role of music in society. Taking this quip seriously, however, what was this “old gay and lesbian musicology”? Who wrote it, what sources did they draw from, and how did they manage to connect with readers and fellow scholars? What did it look like? How did it engage with more mainstream historical and musical sources and scholarship? Where did it go? Why do we generally speak of the pioneers of queer musicology as being active during the 1980s and 1990s, not in the 1890s? Moving toward

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*Essays*, ed. George E. Haggerty (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006), 8n3.

an answer to these questions requires broadening both our definitions of musicology and the musicological lens. The traces of the “old” queer musicology and those who created it are, by necessity, frequently esoteric and oblique. The “old” queer musicology relies on dubious sources, personal idiosyncrasies, and the protections afforded by plausible deniability, loaded language, and/or self-publishing.

By examining the biographical and analytical writings of Rosa Newmarch (1857–1940) and Edward Prime-Stevenson (1858–1942), I argue that one finds traces of issues and frameworks that continue to spark debates around queer life-writing in musicology today, including questions of biographical readings of musical works, suppressed or hidden archives, and what stories are prioritized in musicological research.<sup>2</sup> Despite working in different fields and with different ideas about how their understandings of their own sexual identity (as far as it can be determined) interacted with their musicological knowledge, both clearly felt that the interactions between music and sex in the broadest sense meant *something* pivotal to their work, relationships, and musical experiences. I term this *something* “musical-sexual knowledge,” following Heike Bauer’s identification of an “English literary sexology” that translated concepts and frameworks from (often German) medical sexology through a humanities lens.<sup>3</sup> The medical origins of Bauer’s literary sexology in novels such as Radclyffe Hall’s *The Well of Loneliness* (1928) are clearly recognizable, but are also transformed into something distinct from the medical case studies. In a similar manner, the musical-sexual

knowledge of the likes of Prime-Stevenson and Newmarch evades easy classification while drawing from the same kinds of ambiguity, hearsay, and subjectivity found in sexology and sex reform literature.<sup>4</sup> Evidence for readers at the time picking up on this musical-sexual knowledge can be found in the writings of E. M. Forster, whose novel *Maurice* (begun in 1913 but published posthumously) both shows the influence of Newmarch’s Tchaikovsky scholarship and reflects the kinds of sexual gossip and canon-building found in Prime-Stevenson’s sexological writings. Connecting and contrasting these sources allow me to unearth some of the older frameworks for conceptualizing and historicizing queer music and musical queerness.

#### THE PROBLEMS OF MUSICAL BIOGRAPHY

In her 1904 biography of the conductor Sir Henry Wood, Rosa Newmarch writes movingly of the problems of the biographer’s role in mediating the subject’s life for a general readership. Noting that Wood was both alive and a close personal friend, Newmarch admits that “to write of living celebrities needs the special gifts of tact and an impartial temper,

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<sup>4</sup>For the repetition of (auto)biographical anecdotes across sexological and sex reform writings, see the discussion of gay and lesbian sexologists (including Prime-Stevenson) in Henry L. Minton, “The Relationship Between Homosexuals and Sex Researchers, 1870–1940,” in *Departing from Deviance: A History of Homosexual Rights and Emancipatory Science in America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002), 7–32; and Heike Bauer, “Scholars, Scientists, and Sexual Inverts: Authority and Sexology in Nineteenth-Century Britain,” in *Repositioning Victorian Sciences: Shifting Centres in Nineteenth-Century Scientific Thinking*, ed. David Clifford (London: Anthem, 2006), 197–206. Liz Stanley makes a similar argument about the role of self-description in the correspondence of and case studies by and about sexologist and socialist lecturer Edith Lees Ellis (whose husband, Havelock Ellis, coauthored with John Addington Symonds the first book-length sexological study of “sexual inversion” in English). See Liz Stanley, “Epistemological Issues in Researching Lesbian History: The Case of Romantic Friendship,” in *Working Out: New Directions for Women’s Studies*, ed. Hilary Hinds, Ann Phoenix, and Jackie Stacey (London: Falmer, 1992), 161–73. For shared literary references (many of which appear in sexology and sex reform works), see Nat Hurley, “The Queer Traffic in Literature, or, Reading Anthologically,” *ESC* 36 (2010): 81–108.

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<sup>2</sup>Recent programs of the LGBTQ Study Group of the American Musicological Society and the LGBTQ+ Music Study Groups (affiliated with the British Forum for Ethnomusicology, the Royal Musical Association, the Society for Music Analysis, and the Society for Musicology in Ireland) reveals panels on aesthetics and hermeneutics, biography, analysis, methodologies, and archival strategies. For an overview of current research concerns and questions in queer musicology, “Colloquy: Music and Sexuality,” ed. Judith A. Peraino and Suzanne G. Cusick, *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 66/3 (2013): 825–72.

<sup>3</sup>Heike Bauer, *English Literary Sexology: Translations of Inversion, 1860–1930* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009). See also *Sexology and Translation: Cultural and Scientific Encounters across the Modern World*, ed. Heike Bauer (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2015).

to which most probably I have no claim whatever" and "there is always the risk of saying more than should be said in a man's lifetime."<sup>5</sup> Newmarch's call for "tact and an impartial temper" highlights a persistent tension between the private and public nature of music biography, one which lingers to this day and has in some ways been exacerbated in debates over the role of identity in music research.

The problems of biography and the role of the biographer are not limited to the risks of either angering living subjects or upsetting one's friends. As a field, musicology simultaneously struggles with and fetishizes biography as a source of insight into the past. On the one hand, the minute details of a composer's or performer's life can seem to distract from broader interpretations of their work, both as a sign of their exceptional place in music history and as a window into their subjective experiences. On the other, a total neglect of how life influences art risks reifying the notion that great artists are somehow beyond the realm of human foibles and eccentricities. In contexts where the circumstances of a musician's life are taboo or otherwise controversial, the question of biography as research or hindrance becomes even more fraught. Questions of what is "appropriate" or "relevant" to musical biographies frequently boil over into broader debates about methodology, as in the Schubert and Handel debates of the 1990s and the critiques of Barbara Heyman's biography of Samuel Barber.<sup>6</sup> In the case of the Schubert and Handel examples, what was seemingly at stake was not (or not *only*) whether Schubert's and Handel's relationships had been misinterpreted by scholars for so long, but what constituted the historical record in the case of queer

musical biography. As Philip Brett noted, this biographical censure was not universally applied:

The one composer we have been allowed to "know" about in the period is Tchaikovsky. But the disclosing of the Russian composer's sexuality and the careful covering over (or ignoring) of the tracks around Schubert surely has to do with the processing of music by scholarship as a male and predominantly German art. A Russian composer could be homosexual, indeed one so close to Teutonic mastery probably had to be homosexual, because that would allow the exotic, decadent, and effeminate quality of the music to be held up (as I remember it being held up to me in my youth) as a warning. The central German canon must at all costs be preserved in its purity. The closeting of Schubert is of a similar order as the papering over of Wagner's anti-Semitism.<sup>7</sup>

Brett points to two key problems in queer musical biography: the limits of "acceptable" queer biographical knowledge and the implications this has for how we interpret different types of music. The fact that music biographers have disclosed or alluded to Tchaikovsky's homosexuality before addressing "the tracks around" the likes of Schubert and Handel presents several additional problems for examining Tchaikovsky's scholarly reception. Whereas with the two earlier composers, a general lack of intimate personal details frequently leads biographers to construct speculative inner lives out of general historical context and the lives of those around their subjects, different types of knowledge about Tchaikovsky have shaped the scholarly record in a different way. How one viewed Tchaikovsky and his music—as troubled, heroic, unstable, sympathetic, confessing, concealing—largely depended on one's reaction to the disclosure of his homosexuality. Individual biographical readings of Tchaikovsky's music that took up psychological approaches to his works thus often ultimately (and unfortunately) reveal more about the climate in which those readings took place than about the subject within his particular historical context.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>5</sup>Rosa Newmarch, *Henry J. Wood* (London: Lane, 1904), 1.

<sup>6</sup>For the former two debates, see "Schubert: Music, Sexuality, Culture" (ed. Lawrence Kramer, special issue), this journal 17/1 (1993); and Ellen T. Harris, "Homosexual Context and Identity: Reflections on the Reception of *Handel as Orpheus*," in *Queer People: Negotiations and Expressions of Homosexuality, 1700–1800*, ed. Chris Mounsey and Caroline Gonda (Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press, 2007), 41–68. For a summary of the latter in the context of broader developments in queer theory and musicology, see Kyle Kaplan, "At Home with Barber: *Vanessa* and the Queer 1950s" (MA thesis, McGill, 2015), 1–10.

<sup>7</sup>Philip Brett, "Musicality, Essentialism, and the Closet," in *Queering the Pitch: The New Gay and Lesbian Musicology*, ed. Philip Brett, Elizabeth Wood, and Gary C. Thomas, 2nd edn. (New York: Taylor & Francis, 2006), 15.

<sup>8</sup>For more on how this approach to knowledge about Tchaikovsky took place during Newmarch's and Prime-Stevenson's careers, see Malcolm Hamrick Brown's survey

The problem in Tchaikovsky scholarship, particularly for those who wished to discount the relevance of queer musicology, was not a lack, but rather an excess of evidence, that one could not always easily explain away in terms of platonic friendships and homosociality.<sup>9</sup>

These concerns—about inclusions and exclusions in music biography, about how and if knowledge of a composer's life influences later hearings of their music, even about the validity of multiple possible readings of the same anecdotes and examples—are not unique to Tchaikovsky, queer biography, or twentieth-century musicology. Yet the struggle over what types of sources are “relevant” within musicological research raises several questions around the evaluation and use of sources that are informal, missing, contested, or otherwise ambiguous. Although Prime-Stevenson and Newmarch approached the issue of musical biography from different angles, both grappled with sources aligned with musical-sexual knowledge that they could not fully explicate.

#### EDWARD PRIME-STEVENSON'S QUEER SYMPHONIC PROJECT

American-born music critic and amateur sexologist Edward Prime-Stevenson poses intriguing problems to the project of queer musical

historiography, life-writing, and hermeneutics.<sup>10</sup> Born to a wealthy family in Madison, New Jersey, Edward Stevenson apparently studied law as a young man, although he never practiced. Instead, he turned to writing fiction and newspaper columns. His surviving books divide easily into four general categories: boys' adventure novels, sentimental short stories, music criticism, and amateur sexology.

Around the turn of the century, Prime-Stevenson left the United States, traveling throughout Europe and continuing for a time to freelance for newspapers in New York and London. Eventually, he settled permanently in Europe, largely dividing his time between resorts in Florence and Lausanne. A large inheritance from a maternal uncle facilitated his now double-barreled surname (his earlier books and newspaper columns are signed E.I.S.), his travels abroad, and his ability to self-publish on a variety of subjects. For his two book-length works on homosexuality, he devised the pseudonym Xavier Mayne, referring in public only to his authorship “(under pseudonyms) of important studies in a branch of the psychiatrics of sex.”<sup>11</sup>

The piecemeal and self-referential nature of Prime-Stevenson's research is perhaps best at play in his work as “Mayne.” *The Intersexes* contains over 700 pages documenting all that the author was able to compile on the history, subcultures, and experiences of “simisexual” men and women.<sup>12</sup> Given his literary and

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of homophobic language in Anglophone Tchaikovsky scholarship from the first half of the twentieth century. Malcolm Hamrick Brown, “Tchaikovsky and His Music in Anglo-American Criticism, 1890s–1950s,” in *Queer Episodes in Music and Modern Identity*, ed. Sophie Fuller and Lloyd Whitesell (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2002), 134–49.<sup>9</sup>Recent critiques of Tchaikovsky's scholarly reception have emphasized important distinctions between Anglophone (largely British and U.S.) and Russian (and Soviet) interpretations of Tchaikovsky's sexuality and his role as a gay historical figure. These include Richard Taruskin, “Pathetic Symphonist: Chaikovsky, Russia, Sexuality, and the Study of Music,” in *On Russian Music* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008), 76–104; and the brief discussion of Tchaikovsky's reception in post-Soviet Russian popular culture in Stephen Amico's conclusion to *Roll Over, Tchaikovsky!: Russian Popular Music and Post-Soviet Homosexuality* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2014), 184–87. In the introduction to *Tchaikovsky's Pathétique and Russian Culture* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2014), Marina Ritzarev argues that Russian and later Soviet scholars (beginning with Tchaikovsky himself in letters intended for later publication) have been inclined to sanitize the composer's biography, while Western scholarship has focused on his sexuality to the exclusion of other elements.

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<sup>10</sup>Portions of this section, along with a more detailed exploration of Prime-Stevenson's research process, queer readings of Beethoven and Wagner (among others), and revisions of earlier music criticism, were previously published in a slightly different form in Kristin M. Franseen, “Onward to the End of the Nineteenth Century: Edward Prime-Stevenson's Queer Musicological Nostalgia,” *Music & Letters* (2020): <https://doi.org/10.1093/ml/gcz108>.

<sup>11</sup>Anonymous [probably Edward Prime-Stevenson], “Stevenson, Edward Prime-,” in *Who's Who in America*, vol. 7, ed. Albert Nelson Marquis (Chicago: A.N. Marquis, 1913), 2002.

<sup>12</sup>Nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century writings on homosexuality employ an array of terms ranging from the euphemistic to mythological to the quasi-medical. While he borrows terminology from a variety of sources, Prime-Stevenson generally preferred “simisexual” as a generic term for homosexuality to the discussions of “inversion” favored by the medical sexologists Ellis and Hirschfeld. He also uses nineteenth-century jurist and reformer Karl Heinrich Ulrichs's “Uranian,” a word choice that connected

artistic interests, the bulk of the volume is given over to accounts of prominent simisexuals in history, literature with simisexual themes, and reworkings of sexological case studies for non-scientific readers. “Mayne” quotes extensively from poetry and fiction with same-sex themes, including lengthy excerpts from Prime-Stevenson’s own novels and personal translations of works only available at that time in French or German. Through this persona, “Mayne” presents an unusual example of an artist explaining for a select readership the secret messages to be found in apparently mainstream works. As we will see, however, neither “Mayne” nor Prime-Stevenson confine the question of secret programs to their own writings.

While “Mayne” was far from the only sex reformer or sexologist of his time to discuss music and performance in the context of sexuality, his discussions of music and drama differ markedly from the approaches taken by the more sexologically minded Magnus Hirschfeld and Havelock Ellis. Hirschfeld and Ellis deal with “musicality” more generally as a congenital trait in their case studies and analyses, compiling data on the supposed number of “inverts” engaged in musical and dramatic professions.<sup>13</sup> By contrast, “Mayne” seems to suggest more of a specifically simisexual way of experiencing music. He divides his analysis of music in *The Intersexes* into three main sub-headings: “the neurotic source of music,” “music as an eternal sphynx of art,” and “considerations of music and simisexualism.”<sup>14</sup> The first section focuses primarily on general notions of music and “nerves,” influenced by early psychological research into “neuroticism” and “neurasthenia,” but the second is more concrete, and consists largely of a detailed list of the kinds of music he

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him intellectually to the international and upper-class networks associated with the likes of Edward Carpenter and John Addington Symonds. For more on Ulrichs’s use of Classical Greek terminology and impact on German and British sexology, see Ralph M. Leck, *Vita Sexualis: Karl Ulrichs and the Origins of Sexual Science* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2016).

<sup>13</sup>See, for instance, the case studies on musicians compiled in Magnus Hirschfeld, *Die Homosexualität des Mannes und des Weibes* (Berlin: Marcus, 1914), 509–11.

<sup>14</sup>“Xavier Mayne” [Edward Prime-Stevenson], *The Intersexes: A History of Similixualism as a Problem in Social Life* (Rome: Privately Printed, 1908 or 1909), 395–99.

associated with homosexuality—complete with reprinted anecdotes about simisexual identification with individual composers and pieces. One presumes that he derived these from either his own experiences or other members of his international social circle. Tchaikovsky is the only figure “Mayne” names in his section on “music and drama and uranianism” (a term for male homosexuality developed by the German jurist Karl Heinrich Ulrichs and used by Hirschfeld in his medical and political writings) who remains an utterly unsurprising presence in current queer musical histories. His account here resonates with similar gossip about Tchaikovsky alluded to in Rosa Newmarch’s Tchaikovsky scholarship and E. M. Forster’s *Maurice*, not to mention ongoing debates a century onward about the construction of Tchaikovsky in musicology, criticism, and biography:

The death of the brilliant and unhappy Russian composer Tschaikowsky has been affirmed (if denied with equal conviction) as a suicide, not a sudden illness, in consequence of terror of a scandal that hung over him—a relative being spoken of as the persecutor. Some homosexual hearers of Tschaikowsky’s last (and most elegiac) symphony, known as the “Pathetic” claim to find in it such revelations of a sentimental-sexual kind that they have nicknamed the work the “Pathic” Symphony. Brahms and the colossal Bruckner have been characterized as “the ultimate voices in a homosexual message by symphonic music”; even if one sub-consciously uttered.<sup>15</sup>

Here, one observes the importance of musical-sexual gossip in both “Mayne’s” and Prime-Stevenson’s research. He begins with the common biographical rumors of suicide and symphonic autobiography (or confession) circulating in a variety of musical circles during the 1890s and 1900s, but quickly moves into the realm of hidden listening practices: “the homosexual hearers” of the *Pathétique*. The *Pathétique* / “Pathetic” (the then-standard English translation) / “Pathic” lines refer to a joke about sexual passivity, which Prime-Stevenson here attributes both to “homosexual hearers” and to the “revelations of a sentimental-sexual kind” that they supposedly find in Tchaikovsky’s music.

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<sup>15</sup>*Ibid.*, 396–97.

By starting with Tchaikovsky as an “accepted” creator of queer musical meaning, “Mayne” grounds his more distant claims about other symphonic works and composers. The “hearers” (among whom, one assumes, Prime-Stevenson numbered himself) are one of his recurring primary sources for building a queer musical canon, and their experiences of certain types of music are even more central to his arguments than biographical evidence taken from composers’ lives. Based on the possibilities of musical revelations, “Mayne” next includes a number of composers within his queer canon who might be more surprising to the twenty-first-century musicologist or concertgoer. He suggests an alternate narrative of Beethoven’s famously unhappy relationships with women and his nephew Karl, arguing that “composers present homosexual types: during either all their lives, or a portion of them. The supreme secret of the noble-natured and moral Beethoven seems to have been an idealized homosexuality. In Beethoven’s sad latest days, can be traced a real passion for that unworthy nephew Carl: who, it is said, once sought to extort money from Beethoven, on threats to disclose an [sic] homosexual relationship!”<sup>16</sup> “Mayne’s” queer reading of Beethoven, while brief, is complicated by musical and biographical claims. His opening thesis that “composers” generally present homosexual types can be interpreted either in terms of biographical details or in terms of musical interpretation. As with Tchaikovsky and the *Pathétique*, “Mayne” suggests an unusually direct parallel between biography and music in moving toward a simisexual reading of Beethoven’s Piano Sonata, op. 111. While he shies away here from presenting specific musical details, he claims that the piece “is often called among German and Austrian Uranians, ‘the Uranian Sonata,’ from some legendary ‘in-reading’ of the work.”<sup>17</sup>

Prime-Stevenson’s linking of the perceived biographical and musical similarities between Tchaikovsky and Beethoven serves to ground his otherwise eccentric queer reading of the symphonic canon. Initially, it might be easy to

dismiss this remark as either wishful thinking or musicological quackery on Prime-Stevenson’s part, a sort of queer counterpart to the perennial debates about the identity of the so-called Immortal Beloved. Prime-Stevenson, however, is not the only source for homoerotic—or, at least, homosocial—readings of Beethoven’s music and politics. While “Mayne” spells out his reading of Beethoven more overtly than many of his contemporaries, one finds traces of his claims in other sources, especially in relation to queer reclamations of the piano as a gendered and eroticized domestic instrument. Edward Carpenter’s political and artistic writings reveal something like “Mayne’s” supposed “in-reading” of Beethoven’s piano sonatas in his focus on brotherhood and the importance of the piano as a source of personal and communal growth tied to his own democratic and socialist ideals. As one of “Mayne’s” readers and a frequent writer on both sexual and artistic subjects, Carpenter recognized the potential for sympathetic readings of artistic and literary works. In his *The Intermediate Sex*, Carpenter cites “Mayne’s” novel *Imre* alongside works by sexologists Havelock Ellis, Marc-André Raffalovich, and Richard von Krafft-Ebing. In this passage, Prime-Stevenson has the character Oswald directly link Beethoven and Tchaikovsky to his own coming-out process, remarking that “I had half-divined it in the music of a Beethoven and a Tschaiakowsky before knowing facts in the life-stories of either of them—or of an hundred other tone-autobiographies.”<sup>18</sup>

What is the purpose behind Prime-Stevenson’s claims about “homosexual messages” in symphonic music, in particular the claim that such gossip is universal among a group of unnamed “German and Austrian Uranians”? Richard

<sup>18</sup>While Oswald does not cite specific musical examples for these “tone-autobiographies,” Prime-Stevenson’s use of repeated allusions to the same musical and literary repertoire elsewhere in his writings suggests that this refers to Beethoven’s piano sonatas and Tchaikovsky’s *Pathétique*. The fact that Carpenter is able to cite Xavier Mayne in 1908 suggests one path for Prime-Stevenson’s secretive distribution channels for his self-published sexological writings. Xavier Mayne [Edward Prime-Stevenson], *Imre: A Memorandum*, as cited in Edward Carpenter, *The Intermediate Sex: A Study of Some Transitional Types of Men and Women* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1908), 168.

<sup>16</sup>Ibid., 396.

<sup>17</sup>Ibid.

Taruskin and Malcolm Hamrick Brown have both analyzed how the myths of Tchaikovsky's suicide and the "court of honour" around his alleged relationship with a young aristocrat are more indicative of a homophobic approach to queer musical biography in Anglophone musicology and criticism in the first half of the twentieth century than of any specific instance from Tchaikovsky's life.<sup>19</sup> When it comes to "Mayne's" and Carpenter's readings of Beethoven and Tchaikovsky in similar terms, however, the myths of blackmail, cross-generational and incestuous relationships, and the threat of ruin seem less a "punishment" for his subjects' sexuality than a reworking of familiar negative tropes from 1890s sex scandals to suit a writer and readers searching for a history of homosexuality in its reclaiming of negative or ambiguous sources in order to construct queer meanings.

Prime-Stevenson here uses symphonic music as a carrier of hidden meanings more generally in order to justify moving beyond Tchaikovsky and a dependence on documentary biography, which for queer figures in this time (as we will see in Newmarch's works) frequently requires the use of censored, homophobic, or otherwise negative sources where definitive facts are unavailable or unpublishable. This in turn serves as a kind of underlying support for his more strictly musical claims about Brahms, Bruckner, and Wagner. He writes that various symphonies by Brahms and Bruckner "have been characterized as 'the ultimate voices in a homosexual message by symphonic music,' even if one subconsciously uttered."<sup>20</sup> These statements open up a wealth of questions about "Mayne's" sources, Prime-Stevenson's musical experiences and education, and the exchange of musical-sexual gossip at the turn of the twentieth century. "Mayne" provides no citations for these claims, although he was certainly in correspondence with sexologists and sex reform activists who shared both his love of German music and his

interest in simisexual men and women as keepers of hidden knowledge.

Beethoven, Brahms, and Bruckner—none of whom are today traditionally considered a part of queer musical histories or biographies—do nonetheless all share a few traits that "Mayne" and Prime-Stevenson found musically and personally compelling in considering simisexuality in music. All three were unmarried and had famously unconventional or complicated relationships with women. All wrote primarily "absolute" instrumental music, which lent itself well to subjective readings. Moreover, perhaps most significantly for Prime-Stevenson's professional career and recorded listening habits, all three wrote music that was frequently performed in New York City in the 1890s and decades later available on phonograph records. While the canonical status of "Mayne's" "bachelor composers" might at first seem an unusual quality in an author seeking non-normative readings of music, that very status may have facilitated the "legendary 'in-reading'" in the first place. By framing the sexual (and simisexual) elements of music in *The Intersexes* as a "sphinx," whose riddles can only be answered by a select few, "Mayne" argues that the "otherness" of both absolute music and simisexuality allow for sympathetic communication.<sup>21</sup> Unlike many twentieth- and twenty-first-century attempts to "queer" mainstream cultural artifacts, "Mayne" does not claim to be subverting dominant readings of the canon, but rather suggesting an even more exclusive form of knowledge wherein only those who know what Beethoven's piano sonatas or the symphonies of Bruckner, Brahms, and Tchaikovsky are "really about" truly comprehend the music. Indeed, Prime-Stevenson's two later books on musical subjects, *Long-Haired Iopas* (1927–28) and *A Repertory of One Hundred Symphonic Programmes* (1933), largely dispense with biographical claims, instead privileging the experience of listening as the ultimate source of musical knowledge. The appeals to "tone-autobiographies" in *Imre* and "the ultimate homosexual message" in *The Intersexes* implies a turn away from documented biographical

<sup>19</sup>See Richard Taruskin's "Pathetic Symphonist: Chaikovsky, Russia, Sexuality, and the Study of Music," in *On Russian Music*, 76–104; and Malcolm Hamrick Brown, "Tchaikovsky in Anglo-American Criticism, 1880s–1950s," in *Queer Episodes in Music and Modern Identity*, 134–50.

<sup>20</sup>Prime-Stevenson, *The Intersexes*, 397.

<sup>21</sup>*Ibid.*, 396.

knowledge (often impossible to verify and/or tied to tragedy) and toward a queer “in-reading” of particular musical works. This methodology, while piecemeal in Prime-Stevenson’s writings, finds resonances in more recent discussions of queer musical fandom and debates about hermeneutics within queer music theory.<sup>22</sup>

ROSA NEWMARCH AND THE LIMITS OF  
DOCUMENTARY BIOGRAPHY

While Prime-Stevenson’s search for “tone-autobiographies” led him from historical research into the realm of speculative musical meanings, the biographical and critical writings of Rosa Newmarch reflect different tensions between listener experience and historical evidence. Newmarch, a married woman with no obvious connections to the mostly male network of queer gossip surrounding Tchaikovsky’s death, initially seems an unexpected Tchaikovsky scholar. Encouraged by friends and family to pursue journalism after studying art as a young woman, Newmarch developed an interest in writing and translating biographical articles about Russian artists during the 1880s and 1890s. Her study of Russian, contacts with Eastern European musicians, first research trips to Russia, and establishment in the world of music criticism all coincide with some of the first English performances of the *Pathétique*. Newmarch’s musical friends and colleagues, especially conductor Sir Henry Wood, encouraged her to expand what had been a series of articles in *The Musician* on Tchaikovsky’s life

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<sup>22</sup>For a contemporary example, the panel “Queer Music Theory: Interrogating Notes of Sexuality,” hosted by the Society for Music Theory’s Queer Resource Group and the LGBTQ Study Group of the AMS at the 2014 joint meeting in Milwaukee, WI, included contributions on queer readings of “straight” music (Nadine Hubbs’s analysis of the country song “Jolene” and Naomi André’s work on vocal timbre and race in postcolonial operatic performances), the possibility for queer methods in formalist approaches to music theory (Roger Mathew Grant’s reading of analysis-as-decadence and James Currie’s “cruising as formalism”), and the experience of ambiguity in musical experiences (Gavin Lee on queer phenomenology and Judith A. Peraino on temporality). This session is analyzed briefly alongside other AMS meetings in William Cheng’s “How to Sound Musicological,” in *Just Vibrations: The Purpose of Sounding Good* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2016), 63–68.

and works into a book.<sup>23</sup> This effort produced *Tchaikovsky: His Life and Works* (1900), one of the first book-length biographies of the composer and the first in English.<sup>24</sup> Newmarch’s “Tchaikovsky project” grew in the 1900s and 1910s to include numerous scholarly and popular articles in English and German, an edited translation of Modest Tchaikovsky’s biography of his brother, several program notes intended for distribution at public concerts, the article on Tchaikovsky in the second edition of *Grove’s Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, translations of libretti and song texts, and a sonnet cycle. Her place in the nascent academic field of musicology during her lifetime was largely tied to her skill at languages, connections to important musical men, and gendered notions of public scholarship as a form of “acceptable” women’s labor. In a 1914 letter to Oscar Sonneck, Edward Dent provides an overview of his thoughts on various British musicologists, writing “now let me criticize your British list [of music scholars Sonneck had requested Dent’s opinion of for potential collaborations], for your private eye!”<sup>25</sup> While he includes Newmarch alongside the likes of Hubert Parry and Ernest Newman, Dent is less than complimentary toward her work, remarking that “Rosa N’s only claim to fame is that she knows Russian, but she will write yards of stuff for you, no doubt.” Newmarch herself was clearly aware of the limits placed on her as a female musicologist and a scholar dependent on a more public, rather

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<sup>23</sup>Much later in her career, Newmarch acknowledged Wood as “the motive-power which kept us all moving forward” in the dedication to her last work, *The Concert-Goer’s Library of Descriptive Notes*, 6 vols. (London: Oxford University Press, 1928–1948).

<sup>24</sup>Rosa Newmarch, *Tchaikovsky: His Life and Works, with extracts from his writings, and the diary of his tour abroad in 1888* (London: Richards, 1900).

<sup>25</sup>Sonneck and Dent occupy important places in the establishment of musicology as an academic field in the United States and Britain. Dent was active in the formation of the International Musicological Society, and Sonneck (the former namesake of the Society for American Music) was head of the music division of the Library of Congress and the founder and first editor of the *Musical Quarterly*. Edward Dent, letter to Oscar Sonneck, April 2, 1914, Oscar George Theodore Sonneck Collection, Music Division, Library of Congress, Correspondence File. I thank Annegret Fauser for graciously sharing this letter.



than scholarly, readership, as demonstrated in an article for *The Chesterian* entitled “Confessions of a Programme Writer”:

I was first invited to write analytical notes for the Symphony, Sunday and Promenade Concerts of the Queen’s Hall Orchestra in the autumn of 1908. I accepted this entirely new order of work with trepidation, for I succeeded a distinguished musician, Mr. Percy Pitt, and an equally distinguished critic, Mr. Alfred Kalisch, and felt a weight of responsibility not only to a large public, but to my own sex: for I believe I may claim to have been the first woman analyst, programmer, annotator—What you will; every term for our profession seems equally clumsy. Very soon the absorbing interest of the work outweighed its anxieties, although I have never been able to agree with a Victorian friend who congratulated me on having found “such a nice occupation for a lady.” Much as I liked it, the work did not always prove to be of that silken-flowing, genteel description which a quarter of a century ago was still regarded as the prerogative of “the lady-worker.”<sup>26</sup>

Elsewhere, she was less direct about the limits placed on female scholars. In her memoir of Sibelius, Newmarch comments that the composer’s invitation to dine at New College, Oxford was “an honour for which I was naturally not eligible.”<sup>27</sup>

Tchaikovsky was but one of her many research interests—the catalogue of her works

compiled by Philip Ross Bullock also includes significant scholarship on and translations of Mussorgsky, Rimsky-Korsakov, and Janáček (to name but a few).<sup>28</sup> She also devoted time to writing biographies of people she knew personally, including Henry Wood and the singer Mary Wakefield. Yet the particular issues raised by her Tchaikovsky research represent central questions in music biography then and now: how do we talk about the personal lives of our subjects when information is hidden, lost, or otherwise unavailable? How should knowledge of an artist’s life affect how we as scholars and audiences engage with their work? Newmarch’s own thoughts on biography are contradictory. She recognizes that readers of biographies seek “every scrap of information” on their subjects, yet is hesitant when it comes to the role of the biographer as interpreter of historical evidence, preferring wherever possible to let subjects or their work speak for themselves with little commentary beyond correcting misinformation.

The language of secrecy and revelation pervades Newmarch’s musicological writings. All of which raises the question: just what did Rosa Newmarch find so captivating about Tchaikovsky’s music and private life, and how did she interpret ambiguous or taboo biographical evidence? In an analysis of a selection of her personal writings and published criticism, Bullock argues that “her life and work illustrate the complex and often unresolved interactions between inherited expectations about gender and propriety on the one hand, and her lived experience as a ‘queer’ female individual on the other.”<sup>29</sup> Yet in her public writings on Tchaikovsky, there is

<sup>26</sup>Rosa Newmarch, “Confessions of a Programme-Writer,” *The Chesterian* 9/72 (July–August 1928): 252. Similar assumptions about gender in musical biography (and the potential for sexual transgression) are found in the reception of the early Liszt biographies by Lina Ramann and Marie Lipsius (La Mara). See James Deaville, “Writing Liszt: Lina Ramann, Marie Lipsius, and Early Musicology,” *Journal of Musicological Research* 21 (2002): 73–97.

<sup>27</sup>New College did not admit women until 1979. Rosa Newmarch, *Jean Sibelius: A Short Textbook of a Long Friendship* (Boston: Birchard, 1939), 62. It is worth comparing Newmarch’s experiences as a female guest at Oxford with her acquaintance Ethel Smyth’s experience as the recipient of an honorary doctorate in 1926. While Smyth was invited to dine at Somerville and Lady Margaret Hall along with another female honoree (the Duchess of Atholl), she remarked that photographers recording the ceremony “probably mistook one for the housekeeper or a female Bedel.” See Susan Wollenberg, “Ethel Smyth as Honorary Doctor of the University of Oxford,” in *Felsensprengerin, Brückenbauerin, Wegbereiterin: Die Komponistin Ethel Smyth*, ed. Cornelia Bartsch, Rebecca Grotjahn, Melanie Unsel (Munich: Allitera Verlag, 2010), 85–97.

<sup>28</sup>Philip Ross Bullock, “Appendix: Chronological List of Published Works by Rosa Harriet Newmarch,” in *Rosa Newmarch and Russian Music in Late Nineteenth and Early Twentieth-Century England* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2009), 147–64.

<sup>29</sup>Bullock, “‘That More Liberal Mode of Life’: Rosa Newmarch, Aestheticism, and Queer Listening in Victorian and Edwardian Britain,” in *Music and Victorian Liberalism: Composing the Liberal Subject*, ed. Sarah Collins (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019), 109. Bullock’s chapter appeared shortly after the completion of my dissertation on the queer musicology of Vernon Lee, Newmarch, and Prime-Stevenson, and I am grateful to Lloyd Whitesell for drawing it to my attention.

frequently an overabundance of negative evidence: she does not speak directly about Tchaikovsky's sexuality, shies away from making direct claims about possible autobiographical or confessional meanings in the *Pathétique*, and acknowledges there are numerous vital sources controlled by the Tchaikovsky family that she is unable to access. It is at these moments, however, where Newmarch's professed ambivalence about the limits of biography reminds the reader of that same extramusical gossip and anecdote that ordinarily has no place in Newmarch's documentary research.

AMBIGUITIES, EVIDENCE, AND DEBUNKING IN  
*TCHAIKOVSKY: HIS LIFE AND WORKS*

Even commentators not particularly attuned to the musical-sexual knowledge circulating about Tchaikovsky frequently caught on that there was something tantalizingly mysterious about the *Pathétique*. As Newmarch remarks in the opening pages of *Tchaikovsky: His Life and Works* (1900), "almost every scrap of information concerning the composer of 'The Pathetic' Symphony is eagerly sought after."<sup>30</sup> A few hundred pages later, her account of Tchaikovsky's death reveals, if negatively, something of the rumors surrounding him:

There is no doubt that one of the reasons of the extraordinary popularity of this work [the *Pathétique*] lies in the fact that it has been invested with an autobiographical interest for which there is no real warranty. It is said that in some vague and mysterious way it foreshadowed the composer's approaching end. Perhaps it is also with the idea of supporting this theory that sensationalists have discovered that Tchaikovsky shortly afterwards committed suicide. The idea is picturesque, but neither in Russia nor abroad have I discovered any substantial ground for the report.<sup>31</sup>

For a debunking of "sensationalist" rumor—perhaps even the denial referred to less than a decade later by Prime-Stevenson—this provides substantially little additional information about

Tchaikovsky's death or the "autobiographical interest" of the *Pathétique*. One could easily imagine a musically unaware reader, perhaps someone similar to the protagonist in E. M. Forster's *Maurice*, discovering the existence of this rumor through Newmarch in the first place. Newmarch pointedly does not tell her readers where, how, or through whom she first encountered the rumor, inadvertently providing evidence for its spread among music lovers in this period. While this lack of citations might be expected for a work aimed at a general readership, it is inconsistent with Newmarch's lengthy references to Russian primary and secondary sources for other matters related to Tchaikovsky's life and career. Her account of Tchaikovsky's death, for instance, is largely drawn from the reminiscences of music critic Nikolay Kashkin, and a great deal of space in *Life and Works* is devoted to lengthy translations of Tchaikovsky's own music criticism and diaries. The line "neither in Russia nor abroad have I discovered any substantial grounds for the report" suggests a more active investigation into the rumor on Newmarch's part, but it is left at that. Does the "vague and mysterious way" Newmarch describes the alleged connection between the *Pathétique* and Tchaikovsky's rumored suicide reflect the way in which someone described the rumor to her, perhaps skirting the boundaries of what Brown refers to as the "constraints of propriety" that limited what Newmarch could overtly address?<sup>32</sup>

The focus on Tchaikovsky's self-presentation throughout *Life and Works* seems at first to diminish the role of Newmarch as biographer/translator. Despite her repeatedly stated aim of letting the subject speak for himself, Newmarch does let some moments of clarity come through. She concludes the biographical portion of *Life and Works* with commentary on a translation

<sup>32</sup>Brown claims "Newmarch was most probably made aware of the talk about the composer's heterodox erotic inclinations during her sojourns in Russia, although we cannot know what she made of the information." Malcolm Hamrick Brown, "Tchaikovsky and His Music in Anglo-American Criticism," in *Queer Episodes in Music and Modern Identity*, 138–39.

<sup>30</sup>Rosa Newmarch, *Tchaikovsky: His Life and Works*, vii.

<sup>31</sup>*Ibid.*, 106–07.

from Kashkin's account of the composer's life and death:

M. Kashkin concludes his book with the following somewhat enigmatical passage, which probably refers to the unhappy circumstances of Tchaikovsky's marriage:— "I have now finished my reminiscences. Of course they might be supplemented by a few more events, but I shall add nothing at present, and perhaps I shall never do so. One document I shall leave in a sealed packet, and if thirty years hence it still has any interest for the world, the seal may be broken; this packet I shall leave to the care of the Moscow Conservatoire. It will contain the history of one episode in Tchaikovsky's life upon which I have only touched in my book."

Upon this episode I am not able to throw any further light. When the authorised life and correspondence of the composer appears, his relatives may possibly clear up the mystery which surrounds it. On the other hand, it is more than probable that they will not take the public into their confidence upon a subject about which Tchaikovsky himself preserved an almost unbroken reticence.<sup>33</sup>

Newmarch's speculations as to the contents of Kashkin's "sealed packet" provides an unusually ambiguous conclusion to a biography which in many ways sought to dispel what she viewed as the unproven or unprovable gossip in English musical circles about Tchaikovsky's death. In the preceding pages, she takes Kashkin to task for repeating the "pathetic" autobiographical reading of the *Pathétique*, and she states conclusively in several places that Tchaikovsky died of cholera.

To end with a hint at an unseen private archive suggests her own investment, however unlikely, in solving the Tchaikovsky mystery, and her frequent returns to Tchaikovsky and the *Pathétique* as subjects in her musicological writing. At the same time, this simultaneous lack of information and promise of a surplus of knowledge that remains unreachable reflects what Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick identifies as the "presiding incoherences of modern gay (and hence nongay) sexual specification."<sup>34</sup> Sedgwick, analyzing the overabundance of queer knowledge found in

Proust's fiction, observes the "incoherent" construction of the closet as both spectacle (Proust's narrator's secrets are exposed) and viewpoint (the reader shares in his attempts at concealment). Newmarch's keeping of Tchaikovsky's secrets at arm's length while pondering the nature of Kashkin's sealed packet performs a similar function: posing the "spectacular" revelation of the composer's secrets while asking the reader to empathize with Tchaikovsky's secrecy. Although Newmarch, like Tchaikovsky, disdains those who "condescend to substitute mere autobiography for criticism," her continued linking of the *Pathétique* with subjective emotion (Tchaikovsky's, her own, that of other listeners) and unsaid knowledge is provocative.<sup>35</sup>

One could therefore easily think of Newmarch here as a gatekeeper of musical-sexual knowledge, denying or obscuring the truth about her queer subject. Certainly her ambiguously subjective reading of the *Pathétique* merits multiple readings as denying a specific "morbid" reading of the piece while frequently still placing discussion of the work alongside accounts of Tchaikovsky's unhappy marriage, relationship with Vladimir Davidov, and death. As previously mentioned, Brown views Newmarch's biography as essentially closeting her subject, even if he contextualizes this by considering the limits of what she would have likely been able to get away with publishing. Judith A. Peraino, meanwhile, provides a critique of early Tchaikovsky biography and analysis as essentially confessional, noting that the mentions of "subjective sentiment" in Newmarch's translation of Modest Tchaikovsky inspired "later Tchaikovsky biographers, critics, and would-be psychoanalysts" to "[seize] upon the rhetoric of secrecy as substantiating evidence for musical disclosure."<sup>36</sup> In that same chapter, Peraino also cites Newmarch's *Grove* entry as disparaging of his lack of a clear compositional method, arguing that her language of sentimentality and over-elaboration plays into a homophobic discourse of using technique to "signal a

<sup>33</sup>Newmarch, *Tchaikovsky: His Life and Works*, 110.

<sup>34</sup>Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet*, 2nd edn. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008), 213.

<sup>35</sup>Newmarch, *Tchaikovsky: His Life and Works*, 112.

<sup>36</sup>Judith A. Peraino, *Listening to the Sirens: Musical Technologies of Queer Identity from Homer to Hedwig* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 81.

suspicion of sexual deviance."<sup>37</sup> Peraino argues for a reading of the *Pathétique* that constructs Tchaikovsky's musical emotion not as confessional (a term implying the moralizing and medicalizing discourses of religion and psychology) but confrontational, displaying potentially transgressive emotions without asking for absolution.

While a more critical view of Newmarch's scholarly discretion is certainly valid, I contend that many of Newmarch's readers (including Prime-Stevenson and E. M. Forster) read her project as providing a level of legibility and dissemination of one example of queer lives and experiences. These are seen most clearly in two aspects of Newmarch's writings on Tchaikovsky: descriptions of the *Pathétique* (often closely tied to accounts of Tchaikovsky's personality and temperament) and accounts of his marriage and relationships. While what Newmarch's sources actually told her in person would be near impossible to reconstruct, I contend that at least some of her readers read in her project an example of queer musical life beyond the surrounding narratives of violence and shameful confession. Bullock notes in his biography of Tchaikovsky, that the quasi-psychological quality of Tchaikovsky's scholarly reception obscured his own self-presentation as "a sophisticated self-aware agent in the evolving social, economic and artistic culture of Imperial Russia in the second half of the nineteenth century."<sup>38</sup> While her project was often aimed at correcting what she saw as sensationalist and exaggerated factual errors, her inclusion of the Kashkin account demonstrates one of many places where Newmarch observed a gap in the record and left something to be returned to at an unspecified point in the future. It is telling that Newmarch moves from this uncomfortably unclear moment of speculation in *Life and Works* to a lengthy section devoted to Tchaikovsky's criticism and tour diary, effectively giving him the last word, even if many questions remained unanswered.

<sup>37</sup>Ibid., 108.

<sup>38</sup>Bullock, *Pyotr Tchaikovsky* (London: Reaktion Books, 2016), 10. He makes a similar argument for Newmarch as an agent of Victorian/Edwardian aestheticism and liberalism in "The More Liberal Mode of Life."

"TEMPERAMENTS AKIN TO HIS OWN":  
READING TCHAIKOVSKY IN TRANSLATION

Reading across Newmarch's Tchaikovsky project, there are some hints that she also sought, if not actively to resist the earliest iterations of "confessional" autobiographical analyses of the *Pathétique*, then at least to suggest a more "confrontational" role for certain listeners. The loaded psychological terminology used in much English-language Tchaikovsky research during the first half of the twentieth century (and its effect on later musicology) has been analyzed in detail in the scholarly reception histories compiled by Brown and Taruskin. In one sense, Newmarch differs from later scholars in cautioning her audience against reading too much of the composer's personality into the *Pathétique*, noting in one program note that

although we have Tchaikovsky's own testimony that his unrevealed programme was "penetrated by subjective sentiment," we need not therefore narrow the emotional contents of the Symphony to a mere expression of personal apprehension of death and "the great misgiving." . . . Tchaikovsky gives utterance to thoughts and problems that lie deep down in every thinking mortal. To label such music morbid, pessimistic, neurotic; to repeat truisms to the effect that poets can always find a silver lining in every well-regulated cloud that threatens the horizon of life, is merely to take a superficially optimistic view of a tremendous and inscrutable situation. The experiences which inspired Tchaikovsky in this Symphony are identical with our own; even if we rarely allow them to ripple the surface of life, they agitate its depths in a blind, unconscious way. Therefore when we hear them expressed with such piercing and intimate feeling, Tchaikovsky's music seems to us less a revelation of external truths than a startling emanation from our own innermost being.<sup>39</sup>

Given the frequent use of "morbid" and "neuroticism" as code words for male homosexuality at the turn of the century, Newmarch's decision to allude to a vague "tremendous and inscrutable situation" is certainly suggestive. That said,

<sup>39</sup>Newmarch, "The Pathetic Symphony," program note reprinted in M, "Mrs. Rosa Newmarch," *Musical Times* 52 (April 1911): 227.

she vacillates between what seem to be her own personal experiences of the *Pathétique*, Tchaikovsky's emotions while writing it, and a "universal" sense of the symphony's musical emotion that transcends individual response.

Yet even here, there remains the allusion to things unable to be said, in Newmarch's conclusions that "the experiences which inspired Tchaikovsky in the Symphony are identical with our own; even if we rarely allow them to ripple the surface of life."<sup>40</sup> This description is simultaneously specific enough to give some sense of how she imagined composition and interpretation as working together to supplement emotional response, and vague enough to allow for multiple listeners to construct their own deeply personal secret meanings. It also puts the onus of finding meaning in the symphony (and identification with Tchaikovsky) squarely on the shoulders of the audience.

Newmarch's emphasis on listener experiences here is closely tied to the contemporary theories of art and music appreciation to which she subscribed, in which educated listening was closely linked to self-knowledge and personal response. Drawing on psychological theories of emotional responses to the visual arts, especially those put forth by aestheticians Walter Pater and Vernon Lee, Newmarch understood intense, often embodied personal experiences with music as supplementing the guidelines provided by program notes and other analytical texts. Music appreciation was thus a way to understand one's emotional responses to music. As she argues in her program note to Debussy's *Prélude à l'après-midi d'un faune*, while there might be some intrinsic meanings to instrumental music intended by the composer, "each individual listener will make his own interpretation of the symbolical meaning of the work."<sup>41</sup> Likewise, in the conclusion of her article on Tchaikovsky for *Grove's Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, Newmarch ties listener experience to the popular reception of Tchaikovsky as an emotional and autobiographical composer:

The time of prejudice against Tchaikovsky's music on the ground of its national peculiarities has long since gone by; at least in this country, where his reception has always been more enthusiastic than critical. As regards its powers of endurance, the prophetic spirit is hardly needed in order to foresee the waning popularity of a few of his works which have run a course of sensational success. . . . If Tchaikovsky does not bear a supreme message to the world, he has many things to say which are of the greatest interest to humanity, and he says them with such warmth and intimate feeling that they seem less a revelation than an unexpected effluence from our own innermost being. His music, with its strange combination of the sublime and the platitudinous, will always touch the average hearer, to whom music is—and ever will be—more a matter of feeling than of thought. Therefore, if we must pose the inevitable question—How long will Tchaikovsky's music survive?—we can but make the obvious reply: As long as the world holds temperaments akin to his own: as long as pessimism and torturing doubt overshadow mortal hearts who find their cry re-echoed in the intensely subjective, deeply human music of this poet who weeps as he sings and embodies so much of the spirit of its age; its weariness, its disenchantment, its vibrant sympathy, and morbid regretfulness.<sup>42</sup>

In her reference to temperaments akin to his own, I am not arguing here that Newmarch intentionally snuck some sort of commentary on musical homosexuality into *Grove* in 1910; however, the idea of the musical experience filling in the gaps of what could not be fully explained in print is particularly compelling when it comes to taboo subject matter and personal experience. The emotion Newmarch argues for in Tchaikovsky's music is ultimately not the composer's confession, but the listener reflecting upon her own feelings and experiences. Given this interpretation, one might therefore understand the denials, gaps, and ambiguities across Newmarch's writings on Tchaikovsky as potential places to explore her (and her readers') approach to sexuality.

<sup>40</sup>Ibid.

<sup>41</sup>Newmarch, "Prélude à l'après-midi d'un faune," in *The Concert-Goer's Library of Descriptive Notes*, vol. 5 (London: Oxford University Press, 1938), 26.

<sup>42</sup>Newmarch's "prophetic spirit" may have needed fine-tuning, as the works she suggested were "waning" included the *1812 Overture* and the *Nutcracker's* "Dance of the Sugarplum Fairies." Newmarch, "Tchaikovsky, Peter Ilich," in *Grove's Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, ed. J. A. Fuller Maitland (New York: Macmillan, 1910), vol. 5: 33–49, see 48–49.

In a few rare cases, it is not necessary to resort to speculation as to what queer readers thought about potential links between Tchaikovsky's biography and their own experiences. According to his diaries, the novelist E. M. Forster obtained a copy of Newmarch's translation of Modest Tchaikovsky's *Tchaikovsky: His Life and Letters* around 1912, only a year before beginning work on the novel *Maurice*. Based on his comments on the book, it is clear that he had previously encountered some of the rumors around Tchaikovsky (possibly from Goldsworthy Lowes Dickinson, a music critic and part of the underground queer circle at Cambridge to which Forster belonged, or Edward Carpenter, whose relationship with George Merrill inspired that between Maurice and Alec Scudder). In any event, Forster clearly knew how to read between the lines, even of an abridged translation of a work by a queer author who had spent decades hiding his brother's (and his own) secrets. Forster transcribed excerpts from Tchaikovsky's letters into his diary, and remarked at one point "Am coming to the illness in which he [Tchaikovsky] longed for intimacy, felt he had known no one intimately, and so tried marriage."<sup>43</sup> In *Maurice*, Forster is even more direct about the musical-sexual knowledge to be gleaned from Tchaikovsky's life and the *Pathétique*.

In her work on the novel, Michelle Fillion has analyzed the use of certain movements and themes from the *Pathétique* as part of Maurice's coming out process. I would like to draw attention to what Forster and Maurice read by and into Newmarch as a historical source, as well as the context of how and where Maurice encounters biographical information about Tchaikovsky. The novel's protagonist, Maurice Hall, attends a performance of the *Pathétique* in London with Violet Tonks, his sister Kitty's close friend, in the hopes that this will lead to heterosexual feelings and eventually

<sup>43</sup>E. M. Forster, *Locked Diary*, as cited in Michelle Fillion, "Tchaikovsky and the Deflowering of Masculine Love in *Maurice*," in *Difficult Rhythm: Music and the Word in E. M. Forster* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2010), 93–107, see 93.

marriage. While there, he runs into Risley, a former Cambridge classmate and a fine example of one of Prime-Stevenson's "homosexual hearers":

Unfortunately, after the concert he met Risley.

"Symphony Pathique," said Risley gaily.

"Symphony Pathetic," corrected the Philistine.

"Symphonie Incestueuse et Pathique." And he informed his young friend that Tchaikovsky had fallen in love with his own nephew, and dedicated his masterpiece to him. "I come to see all respectable London flock. Isn't it supreme!"<sup>44</sup>

Note the "sentimental-sexual" joke on "Pathique/Pathetic/Pathétique" referenced earlier by Prime-Stevenson, as well as Risley's joy at the double-meanings he finds in the music, seemingly unknown to "all respectable London."<sup>45</sup> Where might the English-speaking Risley have heard of Tchaikovsky's relationship with his nephew, Vladimir "Bob" Davidov, the dedicatee of the *Pathétique*? Although oral transmission of the rumor had certainly been in effect for some years, what Maurice does next is telling:

But he got a life of Tchaikovsky out of the library at once. The episode of the composer's marriage conveys little to the normal reader, who vaguely assumes incompatibility, but it thrilled Maurice. He knew what the disaster meant and how near Dr Barry had dragged him to it. Reading on, he made the acquaintance of "Bob," the wonderful nephew to whom Tchaikovsky turns after the breakdown, and in whom is his spiritual and musical resurrection. The book blew off the gathering dust and he respected it as the one literary work that had ever helped him.<sup>46</sup>

Maurice, ignorant of other models of self-knowledge and community, is nonetheless able to discern hidden details of Tchaikovsky's relationships from an unspecified "life" available at a library. This life, given the setting, is

<sup>44</sup>E. M. Forster, *Maurice* (New York: Norton, 1971), 161–62.

<sup>45</sup>This kind of joke would not have been unfamiliar to Tchaikovsky himself, whose letters are full of double-entendres and sexual language that only recently has been accurately translated into English. See Bullock, "Čajkovskij and the Language of Same-Sex Desire," *Jahrbuch Musik und Gender*, vol. 10: *Musik und Homosexualität—Homosexualität und Musik*, ed. Kadja Grönke and Michael Zywiets (Hildesheim: Olms, 2017), 49–59.

<sup>46</sup>Forster, *Maurice*, 162.

clearly either Newmarch's biography or (more likely, given Forster's own reading) her translation of Modest Tchaikovsky. Maurice's reading of Newmarch is both subversive and deeply personal: "blowing off the gathering dust" of his own anxieties and allowing him to begin the process of self-acceptance and moving beyond the limits of social respectability. Unlike Prime-Stevenson's Oswald, whose self-awakening began with hearing the "tone-autobiographies" of Beethoven and Tchaikovsky, Maurice can decode the mysteries of musical-sexual knowledge only with a written guide.

For such a momentous occasion, Newmarch's own remarks on Tchaikovsky's personal life and the potential autobiographical nature of the *Pathétique* are more far circumspect than Risley or Maurice suggest. As we have seen in *Tchaikovsky: His Life and Works*, she denied any overt autobiographical character to the symphony, and instead pushed for a largely subjective understanding of Tchaikovsky's musical melancholy. The wealth of information that Forster (and Maurice and Risley) finds in Newmarch's translation of *The Life and Letters of Peter Ilich Tchaikovsky* might surprise the twenty-first-century reader, who finds in it only vague and questionable language about the composer's incompatibility with his wife, concern about certain rumors while employed at the Moscow conservatory, and the dedication of the *Pathétique* to Davidov. At the same points where Forster's protagonist finds the greatest insight, Newmarch and Modest emphasize the "romantic" friendship between Tchaikovsky and von Meck, and admit the limitations of the composer's letters to paint the full picture.<sup>47</sup> Likewise, while it is true that Modest describes his brother's life in far greater detail than that previously available to English audiences, he and Newmarch do not present anything that might—as Forster remarks—convey anything untoward to the "normal" or "respectable" reader. For those who, like Forster and Prime-Stevenson, had some sense of what to read or listen for, however, there was more to unpack. For instance, at one point,

Tchaikovsky and Newmarch cite a lengthy passage of a letter from Tchaikovsky to Nadezhda von Meck, in which he discounts the idea of marriage. Modest immediately takes issue with all of his brother's proposed reasons for remaining unmarried, remarking that "Tchaikovsky never gives the true reason for his yearning after solitude and a life of 'heavenly quiet and serenity,' but it certainly did not proceed from 'misanthropy,' 'indolence,' or weariness of life."<sup>48</sup> Neither Modest nor Newmarch provides any further explanation or elaboration of this passage, suggesting a kind of closet discourse similar to Newmarch's speculations about the withheld letters in the Tchaikovsky family archives. They mention the possibility of more information, but leave the reader to grasp its full meaning.

Modest's influence on Forster's mention of Tchaikovsky's unhappy marriage and relationship with his nephew is clear. In recounting his brother's disastrous marriage to Antonina Miliukova, Modest writes "it was not until they [Tchaikovsky and Antonina] entered into closer relationship that they discovered, to their horror, they were far from having told each other all; that a gulf of misunderstanding lay between them which could never be bridged over, that they . . . had unintentionally deceived each other."<sup>49</sup> Likewise, his description of Vladimir (Bob) Davidov, which Newmarch saw as vital enough to Tchaikovsky's biography to reproduce in full in her *Grove* article, claims only that "Tchaikovsky preferred the companionship of his nephew; was always grieved to part with him; confided to him his inmost thoughts, and finally made him his heir, commending to this young man all those whom he still desired to assist and cherish, even after his death."<sup>50</sup> Fillion argues that "English readers may have shared Risley's detection of more than familial ties" between Tchaikovsky and Davidov, noting that Maurice reads in Tchaikovsky's life the failures of both "the Uranian love of beautiful adolescents" and the possibility of medical cures and heterosexual marriage.<sup>51</sup>

<sup>48</sup>Ibid., 84.

<sup>49</sup>Ibid., 224.

<sup>50</sup>Ibid., 471.

<sup>51</sup>Fillion, "Tchaikovsky and the Deflowering of Masculine Love," 104–05.

<sup>47</sup>Modest Tchaikovsky, *The Life and Letters of Peter Ilich Tchaikovsky*, ed. and trans. Rosa Newmarch (London: Lane, 1906), x and 220–27.

Selecting these instances from *Life and Letters* as proof of Newmarch's knowledge of Tchaikovsky's sexuality, however, is a matter of guesswork (albeit one Forster, Prime-Stevenson, and likely others engaged in), looking for clues to something the reader already knows and then attributing them to the author-translator. It is clear that Modest thought all of these anecdotes safe enough to publish at the time, and—whatever Newmarch may have heard from “the sensationalists” about the end of Tchaikovsky's life and the nature of his relationships—she likewise found them suitable for translation.

One is therefore left wondering at Newmarch's own experience of reading Modest's account. In her focus on Tchaikovsky's marriage in *Life and Works*, she seems to be engaging with some kind of queer subtext to the gossip and hidden sources, much as Forster and Prime-Stevenson would do when reading her work. What is one to make of Newmarch's description of Tchaikovsky's epistolary relationship with von Meck in her introduction as “the most romantic episode of Tchaikovsky's life”?<sup>52</sup> Although Newmarch admits to omitting letters in her translation involving figures unknown outside of Russia, she includes most of the correspondence with von Meck that was known to exist at the time. This provides a great deal of previously unknown insight into Tchaikovsky's compositional process, sense of his career, and place as a conductor, teacher, and composer, but the remark about the friendship as “romantic” is curious, especially given Newmarch's interpretation of other aspects of Tchaikovsky's life and musical aesthetic. Is this an act of misreading or misdirection on Newmarch's part—what Gary C. Thomas calls “the ladyfriend trap” of assigning female lovers to male composers whose sexuality remains a matter of debate?<sup>53</sup> Perhaps in response to the attitudes of “the sensationalists” Newmarch encountered in her own research, is the reference to “romance” in the context of a female acquaintance a strategy of

further obscuring those moments where Modest did not quite conceal the truth from her scholarly eye? Newmarch's motives in drawing attention to the contrast between the epistolary friendship with von Meck and doomed marriage to Miliukova in Tchaikovsky's life are hard to draw out, but she is careful here to keep to the available sources, leaving interpretation to her readers.

#### CONCLUSIONS: GOSSIP, ANECDOTES, AND THE LIMITS OF BIOGRAPHY

The problem of the gossipy or missing anecdote as a place for reading (or “in-reading”) musical-sexual knowledge did not end with early-twentieth-century music biography. Scenes of gossip about Tchaikovsky appear in both fictional and autobiographical sources for decades following Prime-Stevenson's and Newmarch's writings. One of Prime-Stevenson's former New York colleagues, critic James Gibbons Huneker, had far more ambivalent feelings about Tchaikovsky's depictions of “morbid” emotions, which, as Brown observes, may have stemmed from his “squeamish response to having been presented these unvarnished biographical details.”<sup>54</sup> Nevertheless, Huneker's heavily fictionalized reworking of his earlier newspaper articles, collected in book form as *Old Fogy: His Musical Opinions and Grotesques*, presents a slightly clearer picture of how this gossip might have initially spread,

<sup>54</sup>Malcolm Hamrick Brown, “Tchaikovsky and His Music in Anglo-American Criticism, 1890s–1950s,” in *Queer Episodes in Music and Modern Identity*, 143. Space does not permit a full discussion of Huneker's complex views on sexuality and music. He delighted in scandalizing the more uptight American Wagnerians with stories of Ludwig II's homosexuality. His correspondence includes frequent references to Whitman's poetry, queer gossip about *Parsifal*, and Henry Blake Fuller's 1919 homoerotic novel *Bertram Cope's Year*. For his own part, he was married three times and was reputedly romantically linked to several prominent female artists in New York, including the bisexual opera singer Olive Fremstad, who inspired the “pleasing theme of lesbianism” in his novel *Painted Veils*. See Arnold T. Schwab, *James Gibbons Huneker: Critic of the Seven Arts* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1963), and *Intimate Letters of James Gibbons Huneker*, ed. Josephine Huneker (New York: Boni and Liveright, 1924). Thank you to Prime-Stevenson scholar and collector Tom Sargant for pointing me in the direction of Huneker's essays and letters.

<sup>52</sup>Newmarch, introduction to Tchaikovsky, *Life and Letters of Peter Ilich Tchaikovsky*, x.

<sup>53</sup>Gary C. Thomas, “Was George Frideric Handel Gay? On Closet Questions and Cultural Politics,” in *Queering the Pitch*, 163–65.



described in such a way as to intentionally shock Huneker's readers. The Old Fogy, Huneker's parody of a less-than-perceptive conservative music critic, runs into the grandson of an old friend at a café in New York:

I knew that artistic matters were at a low ebb in New York, yet I never realized the lowness thereof until then. I was introduced to a half-dozen smartly dressed men, some beardless, some middle-aged, and all dissipated looking. They regarded me with curiosity, and I could hear them whispering about my clothes. I got off a few feeble jokes on the subject, pointed to my C-sharp minor colored collar . . .

Jenkins looked sourly at my friend Sledge, but that shy young person behaved most nonchalantly. He whistled and offered Jenkins a cigar. It was accepted. I was disgusted, and then they all fell to quarreling over Tchaikovsky. I listened with amazement.

"Tchaikovsky," I heard, "Tchaikovsky is the last word in music. His symphonies, his symphonic poems, are a superb condensation of all that Beethoven knew and Wagner felt. He had ten times more technic for the orchestra than Berlioz or Wagner, and it is a pity he was a suicide"—"How," I cried, "Tchaikovsky a suicide?" They didn't even answer me.<sup>55</sup>

The Old Fogy never gets his answer and gives his smartly dressed new acquaintances a rambling speech about Tchaikovsky's "most immoral stories" and modern music. This account gives a good sense of the problems inherent in this type of biographical "knowledge," and how the same kind of information (in this case, gossip) could elicit different reactions depending on one's awareness of secret meanings and in-group knowledge. It is not merely the Fogy's homophobia (the disgust at smartly dressed men sharing cigars), but his lack of musical awareness that causes the crowd at the café to desert him.

Decades later, a comic scene in the first act of Billy Wilder's 1970 film *The Private Life of Sherlock Holmes* utilizes references to Tchaikovsky as a by-then familiar shorthand for late-nineteenth-century homosexuality, with one character remarking, "Tchaikovsky. . . . How should I put it? Women . . . not his glass of tea." Wilder's film was released only a year

before Ken Russell's infamously melodramatic biopic *The Music Lovers*, which promised audiences a more explicit view into Tchaikovsky's marriage and private life with the tagline "the marriage of a homosexual to a nymphomaniac." Russell played on the longstanding association of both Piotr and Antonina Tchaikovsky's sexualities with tropes of emotional instability and tragedy. More recently, Tchaikovsky's later years and emotional state have been subject to further debate by Alexander Poznansky, Roland John Wiley, David Brown, and Philip Ross Bullock. Despite repeated reevaluation of documentary evidence presenting a more complicated picture of the man and his context, the idea of Tchaikovsky and the *Pathétique* as a kind of musical shorthand for anxieties about sexuality and the repressive forces of mainstream society persists.


Looking across her Tchaikovsky project and into the realms of personal memoir and poetry, Newmarch's passionate defense of the canon and appeals to emotion no doubt strike many as old-fashioned, especially when it comes to the place of single-subject biography within contemporary musicology. That said, her call for the subjective emotional appeal of Tchaikovsky's music and her implied inclusion of herself in the category of "temperaments akin to his own" raises some additional questions about the place of musicologists as both scholars and lovers of music, an issue that remains pertinent in the 2010s. Despite all of her stated attempts at objectivity, Newmarch's writings ultimately present the act of writing biography as a highly unscientific (and rather piecemeal) process complicated by the need to interpret incomplete evidence. It is contingent upon not only drawing one's conclusions, but also weighing the possible expectations of readers and subjects. What are we to make of these suggestions of a biography that can never be fully told alongside the surviving evidence of Newmarch's queer readership?

Whether the biographer was a prurient sensationalist, a respectful friend, or a sympathetic comrade to her subject, however, Newmarch's status as a female musicologist and as a public writer of biography places queer readings of her work in an uneasy position, not unlike the Tchaikovsky readings done in the 1900s and

<sup>55</sup>James Gibbons Huneker, "Tchaikovsky," in *Old Fogy: His Musical Opinions and Grotesques* (Philadelphia: Presser, 1913), 140–41.

1910s by Forster and Prime-Stevenson. It would be easy to imagine Newmarch's Tchaikovsky research strictly in the role of eliminating queer meanings from music biography in a time of increased public conservatism. Conversely, a direct relationship between Newmarch's references to the gaps and secrets in Tchaikovsky's life with the debates about closeting in later queer musical biographies is equally speculative. Clearly, not all of her readers saw the same meanings in her work as did E. M. Forster, and he ultimately kept his reading secret in deciding against publishing *Maurice*. Prime-Stevenson's more overt declarations of queer symphonic meaning were likewise limited by other circumstances, including his use of pseudonyms, blending of gossip, fact, fiction, and opinion, and the small print run through which *The Intersexes* was carefully released and disseminated by the author as a work of sexology.

If Prime-Stevenson was not as successful at promoting a queer symphonic canon as he might have hoped, the rumors he recounts about the *Pathétique* and Tchaikovsky's death remained active throughout the century. Gossip about Tchaikovsky's sexuality, of course, remained a touchstone for musical-sexual knowledge for several decades: Philip Brett and Lou Harrison have both observed that Tchaikovsky was one of the few composers whose homosexuality was "allowed" to be discussed during the 1970s and 1980s, and Wilder's Holmes tellingly escapes a proposed assignation with a ballerina by declaring "Tchaikovsky is not an isolated case."<sup>56</sup> Despite repeated reevaluation, the idea

of Tchaikovsky and the *Pathétique* as a kind of musical shorthand for anxieties about sexuality and the repressive forces of mainstream society remains prevalent. For musicologists and musicians, the appeal of these rumors goes beyond sensationalist voyeurism and into the relation between personal identity and aesthetics. Whatever Newmarch, Prime-Stevenson, Forster, and others may have thought or known of Tchaikovsky, they shared an investment in the sorts of personal knowledge, experiences, and connections that could be gained by knowing how to seek through music and anecdote what was not always apparent or allowed in the official sources and conversations. Despite the variety of their approaches, they each tried to understand the role of music in shaping both individual and group emotions and experiences, especially those that could not be properly or completely described in print. They also struggled with what kinds of conclusions they could draw from imperfect, incorrect, or missing evidence, especially when it came to queer subject matter and experiences that they could not name as such or openly discuss without the perilous safety of distance, privacy, and control. 

### Abstract.

Beginning with the "open secret" of Benjamin Britten and Peter Pears's relationship and continuing through debates over Handel's and Schubert's sexuality and analyses of Ethel Smyth's memoirs, biography has played a central role in the development of queer musicology. At the same time, life-writing's focus on extramusical details and engagement with difficult-to-substantiate anecdotes and rumors often seem suspect to scholars. In the case of early-twentieth-century music research, however, these very gaps and ambiguities paradoxically offered some authors and readers at the time rare spaces for approaching questions of sexuality in music. Issues of subjectivity in instrumental music aligned well with rumors about autobiographical confession within Tchaikovsky's Symphony No. 6 (*Pathétique*) for those who knew how to listen and read between the lines. This article considers the different ways in which the framing of biographical anecdotes and gossip in scholarship by music critic-turned-amateur sexologist Edward Prime-Stevenson and Tchaikovsky scholar Rosa Newmarch allowed for queer readings of symphonic music. It evaluates Prime-Stevenson's discussions of musical biography and interpretation in *The Intersexes* (1908/9) and

<sup>56</sup>"The gay world has always known about Tchaikovsky, of course, and there have been rumors about Schubert and his friend." Harrison, 1970 interview with *Gay Sunshine*, as cited in Gavin Butt, *Between You and Me: Queer Disclosures in the New York Art World, 1948–1963* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005), 63. Emily Michelle Baumgart's archival research reveals that the references to Tchaikovsky as a signifier of homosexuality in *Private Life* were originally meant to be more explicitly musical. In a discarded scene, the impresario character prepositions Dr. Watson while Holmes plays an excerpt from Tchaikovsky's Violin Concerto in the background. See Baumgart, "'What One Man Can Invent, Another Can Discover': Music and the Transformation of Sherlock Holmes from Literary Gentleman Detective to On-Screen Romantic Genius" (MA thesis, Michigan State University, 2015), 31–32, <https://search.proquest.com/docview/1686537431?accountid=12339>.

Newmarch's *Tchaikovsky: His Life and Works* (1900), translation of Modest Tchaikovsky's biography, and article on the composer in *Grove's Dictionary of Music and Musicians* to explore how they addressed potentially taboo topics, engaged with formal and informal sources of biographical knowledge (including one another's work), and found their scholarly voices in the absence of academic frameworks for addressing gender and sexuality. While their overt goals were quite different—Newmarch sought to dismiss “sensationalist” rumors about Tchaikovsky's death

for a broad readership, while Prime-Stevenson used queer musical gossip as a primary source in his self-published history of homosexuality—both grappled with questions of what can and cannot be read into a composer's life and works and how to relate to possible queer meanings in symphonic music. The very aspects of biography that place it in a precarious position as scholarship ultimately reveal a great deal about the history of musicology and those who write it. Keywords: Tchaikovsky, anecdote, biography, sexuality, historiography