



Teaching Music with the Humanities

with Dr. Junius Johnson

Lecture 6, Demo 2:
Tchaikovsky Symphony
#6, 1st Movement

Outline:

This video will demonstrate how to draw out ideas from within a musical piece itself, rather than from outside sources.

- This is an inverse approach from the previous demonstration video.
- The theme that will be explored here is “pathos” - from Latin *passio*:
 - a strong or overwhelming feeling
 - related to pity, a feeling of catharsis which Aristotle associates with tragedy in his *Poetics*

Example from Tchaikovsky’s Symphony #6, *Pathétique*:

- The opening salvo of the first movement begins with a mournful bassoon.
- This theme is repeated by the strings who appear to be fighting against the inertia of the bassoon.
- The strings introduce a new, faster theme marked by restlessness and frenetic activity.
- There is rising tension and a hint of a storm as the new theme builds and then retreats in the direction of reminiscence.
- The music settles into an ebb and flow of emotion reminiscent of grief, not the immediate desolation of loss but its aftermath:
 - returning to your previous life and trying to move on
 - feeling you will never feel normal again—and not wanting to
- The melody transitions to sweet remembrance and the tug and pull between holding on or moving forward.
 - it doesn’t end, but bleeds into the next section
 - the climbing scales across the orchestra seem to be forcing us to do the thing we don’t want to do, i.e. move forward
 - the horn, supported by the flute, represents the force of the will to rest in the sweetness of memory
- The danger of retrospection is that exposes us to the violence of the initial loss:



- the storm breaks loose in an outburst of fresh grief at the realization that “this is all lost”
- it ends in a cry of rage or despair with the bass drums sounding like the beating of a heart
- this outburst lasts 4 minutes, almost $\frac{1}{4}$ of the whole movement
- As the storm ends, the maddening memory of sweetness returns in a final resignation:
 - the horns express defiance against the loss of sweetness
 - the clarinets outline the melody while the strings march forward with simple notes
 - the brass and winds trudge forward too; nowhere is hope, all is resignation
- Although joy returns in the boisterous 3rd movement, the lonely 4th movement ends the symphony without any hopeful resolution.
 - Tchaikovsky dies 9 days after this symphony premieres
 - questions remain whether he died of natural or self-inflicted causes

The philosophical fault of this piece is not in misrepresenting grief; its fault is in its ignorance that there is anything to relativize the grief.