

A Structural and Harmonic Analysis with Performance Implications of Tchaikovsky's "June: Barcarolle" from "The Seasons, Op. 37a, No. 6"

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Abstract: Tchaikovsky is known as the "master of melody." His melodies are extremely rich, and he is good at using small musical forms to express rich and deep emotional feelings. The musical form and structure of "June: Barcarolle" in Tchaikovsky's piano collection "The Seasons" will be discussed in this paper.

Keywords: Structure; Harmonic analysis

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1. Introduction

Peter Ilyich Tchaikovsky (1840–1893) has gained the distinction of being one of the most famous Russian composers and music educators of the 19th century. Often referred to as "Russia's music master" and "Melody master," he is without doubt one of the most influential musicians in the history of Russian music. Tchaikovsky was born in Watkins, Ural in 1840. His father was an engineer and director of a metallurgical factory. Influenced by his environment and family, Tchaikovsky learned music since his childhood ^[1]. The awakening of Russian national consciousness during the latter half of the 19th century promoted the development of national music to a certain extent. National music is the soul of a nation and is closely related to people's life. Folk music reflects people's social life at that time and expresses people's psychological feelings. The golden age of Russian music began in the 1830s, marked by a new level in the works of Glinka, the pioneer of Russian music. Glinka's composition laid a solid foundation for the development of Russian nationalist music and helped shape its future direction ^[2]. This golden period was born on the fertile soil of Russian folk music, under the premise of the development of church professional music and the creative exploration of a series of previous composers. It experienced a long process of historical accumulation, thus forming a fruitful result ^[3].

Tchaikovsky is known as the "master of melody." His melodies are extremely rich, and he is good at using small musical forms to express rich and deep emotional feelings. His works embody the simplicity of folk songs, the poetic recitation, and the delicate expressive force of harmony. The musical form and structure of "June: Barcarolle" in Tchaikovsky's piano collection "The Seasons" will be discussed in this paper.

2. The creative background for "Barcarolle"

The idea for this piece's title was suggested by N. M. Bernard, the publisher of the magazine "Nouvelist,"

with whom Tchaikovsky had collaborated since 1873. Around November 1875, Bernard sent Tchaikovsky a commission for a piano cycle. Bernard’s letter has not been preserved, but its contents can be easily imagined on the basis of the composer’s reply of November 24, 1875: “I have received your letter. I am very grateful for your kind willingness to pay me such a high fee. I will try my best to fulfill all your requirements. I will send you the 1st piece soon, and maybe two or three at once. If nothing prevents it, it will soon be done: I am very much disposed now to take up piano pieces. Yours, Tchaikovsky. I will keep all your titles.” Consequently, the names of the pieces, that is, the plot–pictures, were offered to the composer by the publisher ^[4].

As a composition, “Barcarolle” is full of those musical traits, which made Tchaikovsky famous: a beautiful melody with luscious, haunting harmonies. Like the rest of the pieces in “The Seasons,” it is composed in ternary form. The middle part brings a contrast, a distinct animation to the somewhat melancholic mood of the outer parts. The middle part is in major, its movement according to the composer’s remark is somewhat livelier, and further, in the course of the development, the music becomes enthusiastic. This middle section has given rise to differences in interpretation associated first with the text that yield different renditions of the work. Besides, it shows differences in emotional expression, as evidenced by the performance of different pianists.

Already during the life of Tchaikovsky, “Barcarolle” became a very popular work. Sharing with N. von Meck considerations about the prevalence of his works abroad, the composer wrote on March 19, 1878, “I even found a surprise there completely unknown to me hitherto arrangements, such as the arrangement of the piano “Barcarolle” (g-moll) for violin and piano and the Andante of the first quartet for flutes ^[5].”

3. Structural and Harmonic Analysis of “June: Barcarolle”

June is in compound ternary form, and the structure of the form is as follows (**Table 1**):

Table 1. The structure of the June: Barcarolle

Introduction	A			B		Transition	A'			Coda
	a+b+a'			c + d			a+b+a'			
1-2	3-12	13-22	23-32	32-39	40-51	52-53	54-63	64-72	73-83	84-99
g	g-B flat-g			G			g-B flat-g			g

Most of the early boat songs (the “Barcarolles” of Mendelssohn and Chopin, for example) are in 6/8, which is to show the rhythmic characteristics of rowing or water waves, but in Tchaikovsky's piano collection “The Seasons,” “Barcarolle” uses a stable 4/4 time signature, which breaks through the previous use of the beat of boat songs. 4 / 4 is used to show the scene of the boat rowing evenly in the water, which has a long and quiet feeling ^[6].

Introduction (mm. 1–2), Andante, these two bars are in G minor. The quiet atmosphere and the sparkling artistic conception are created with the calm, soothing tone and rhythmic arpeggio chord of the left hand.

3.1. Part A (mm. 3–31)

The section A (mm. 3–11) of the opening part is composed of parallel sections in g minor, and the mood of the work is further revealed under the rocking motion of the left–hand chords. Bars 3–6 are composed of 2 + 2 bars, mm. 7–12 are composed of two small sentences, and the last few bars fall to its relative major. At m.11 Tchaikovsky creates some dissonance through the use of fully diminished chords and suspensions before resolving to the tonic G minor, and bar 12 resolves to the G minor. Three parts should be clearly

reflected in the voice part: the melody lines of the high part are clear and gentle; the low part of the lowest part should keep the smooth lines of singing, just like a bass instrument playing; although the middle part is accompanied by harmony, sometimes, there are some short melodies corresponding to the high part. Although it is very short, but it cannot be ignored, and needs to be emphasized, because it has a certain emotional tone, so that people feel the warmth and enthusiasm of the music. Especially in bars 7–10, the melody lines of the high voice part should be clear, coherent, and bright, which should be louder than the harmonic accompaniment of the middle voice, so they should not be mixed. In the 11th bar, each voice has its own melody trend, and the melody lines of the high voice part should be more brilliant. In this bar, the rhythm can be made appropriately, and the harmony accompaniment can be perfectly integrated into the melody.

The “b” section (mm. 13–22), the small opening part is in B flat major, and in the last 22 bars it goes back to the original g minor harmony. This passage continues the theme content of the “a” section, increases the four-degree mold into the theme of the “a” passage, forms parallel sentences with it, and makes the music color consistent with the “a” passage. The decomposition chord of the left hand also contains short melodic segments corresponding to the theme melody of the right hand, and moves along with the melody of the right hand. In 22 bars back to G minor, with the left-hand melody weakened to pave the way for a passage to appear again. The connection of the two hand melodies should be easy, so as to make the appearance of the next reappearance section “a” very natural.

The “a” section (mm. 23–31), which is a strict reproduction of “a,” enters its homophonic G major at the end of the passage^[7].

3.2. Part B (mm. 32-53)

Section “c” (mm. 32–39) is composed of two parallel four bar phrases. The speed of music is gradually accelerated, presenting a cheerful and clear scene. The accompaniment of left-hand splitting chord warms up the musical atmosphere, portraying a scene of people playing on the river in the hot summer night. The sound of carefree laughter and water splashing is hidden in the melody. At the beginning of bar 36, some small segments appeared in the middle part, and the melody echoed with the theme lines of the right hand, which pushed the music to the climax of “d” segment.

Section “d” (mm. 40–53), Allegro, is composed of two parallel sentences of five bars and seven bars. The music enters the climax, and the music becomes clearer and clearer, forming a very sharp contrast with the previous theme melody. The first beat of every bar in this passage should be played very lightly, so as to lead to the singing melody of two or three beats. The phrase in section 42 is repeated four times, and the speed is faster and faster, and the emotion is stronger and stronger. Stanzas 48–49 use a series of minor seventh chords to produce tonal instability. In bar 49–50, the continuous eight times minus chord arpeggio is continuously transposed upward, which makes the music to the climax, and the excited mood also reaches the highest point, just like the splash of water caused by waves and accompanied by people’s boisterous laughter. To ensure the clarity of the melody line of the high voice part of the right hand, each sound played by two hands cannot be vague and should be clear. Then, the melody to the last chord needs to be pushed all the time, and use the pedal to continue the last chord for two beats. After a short pause, in the 52nd bar, the tonality returns to the functional chord in G minor, playing out the connective sentences here with powerful semitone staccato. These slow decomposing chords should be full, but not rash, just like the ripples caused by the waves slowly passing away. Next, the chord of the second beat of the 53rd bar should be played very steadily. The extension of the chord must stay long enough. A gradually weak extension of the sound should be used to calmly connect the reproduction section “a.” These two sections are well prepared for the appearance of the reappearance paragraph “a” and lay a rich emotional tone^[8].

3.3. Part A' (mm. 54–83)

The reappearance goes back to “a,” but there are some changes. Compared with paragraph “a,” the author’s cleverness lies in changing the accompaniment of the left hand to the arpeggio of breaking down chords, expanding the middle part of the left hand and adding a polyphonic part corresponding to the melody part of the right hand, which makes the music feel fuller and more undulating. The Polyphony echo part of the left hand and the melody part of the right hand speak to each other, which further expresses people’s feelings in this dialogue. Therefore, the middle part of the left hand is more important than paragraph A. While emphasizing the melody lines of the right hand, the middle part of the left hand should be very coherent and fluent.

3.4. Coda (mm. 84–99)

In bars 84–86, the echo part of the middle part appears again in the left hand, slowly playing a continuous downward chord, and the three parts interweave to construct different colors of the combination of virtual and real, which is like the harmonious scene of people’s laughter after rowing across the water. Bars 87–91 are the same as the previous three bars. The middle part of the left hand matches each other, and a series of syncopation rhythms of the right hand are like the scene of a boat paddle. The weakened melody is just like that when people are drifting away but cannot help looking back, reluctant to give up, leaving endless disappointment and longing. 92–96 bars, the last time the music gradually strengthened, the sound area gradually goes upward in the form of arpeggio, the highest part of the right-hand chord always kept echoing with a low part, until the music gradually disappeared. The time value of the last chord in bar 99 can stay a little longer. With its gradually weak overtone, it creates an atmosphere that people gradually leaving by boat. Only the lonely night sky and the shadow of stars shining on the river are filled with beauty in this silent night.

4. Performance Suggestions

Section A, bars 1–12. The left-hand accompaniment group should simulate the continuous singing of bass instruments, while the right hand is the bright and soft main melody of high voice part. When playing the left-hand accompaniment part, we should pay attention to the natural transition of sound, concentrate the strength evenly, and relax the arm, so that the force can be naturally transmitted to the fingertips, resulting in a transparent sound. When performing the transition of the left-hand accompaniment part, we should be careful distinguish the timbre, analyze the level of the music and the line trend of the accompaniment group melody, just like rowing, the wrist is gentle and soft, the force transfer is smooth, the color of harmony of the chord is better expressed, and the line sense and singing quality of the sentence are ensured when the cross-tone performance, making the timbre full of vitality. While playing this part, the coordination of the two parts is the key as well the difficult point. The left arm and wrist should be relaxed, the palmar joint supports and relieves the tension caused by running. The right high voice part sings the main melody lyrically. These parts are more emotional. a little rubato can be added, and the pedal can be replaced to ensure the clarity and consistency of harmony melody. In this part, the relaxation of the palm is important, so that the sentences of the left and right hands can be expressed clearly, and end the first passage to the second ^[9].

After entering the 12th bar, the flow of the right-hand scale makes the melody lines broader, and the tonal conversion also makes the melody more dramatic with ups and downs, pure and simple, which paves the way for a lively night. In the process of moving forward the left-and-right-hand consonants, they are connected freely and full of emotion, which makes the music expression warmer and touching. In this paragraph, the right hand plays a leading role in high pitched melody lines, leading the left hand to accompany part of the ups and downs. In this paragraph, the way of touching the key should be controlled, the finger pulp should be light, the key should be dropped and the key should be stuck. Every two sounds in

the sentence should be closely connected, just like a gecko crawling on the wall, so as to ensure the consistent expression of singing. Before the performance, the speed and the movement direction of the body should be arranged, so that the timbre of this series of connected sounds in the performance process is real but not empty, transparent but not bulky.

In the performance of 52 bar non-legato, it is very natural to transfer the B section to the “a” section of the reproduction section of the complex trilogy. With bar 52 as the introduction bar, energico needs to be played, a little rubato can be allowed, with very expressive natural transition. Compared with paragraph “a”, the reproduction part is more like having questions and answers, while paragraph “a” is more like expressing love for nature and praise of beauty. The melody is more malleable than before.

In the Coda part (bars 83–99), a bright melody line is formed in the descending process of the high part of the chord, and then the left hand echoes a middle part melody. After several tacit echoes, starting from bar 92, from the bass area up, each bar is molded into an octave, until the Boeing arpeggio line at the end of the song, it becomes more and more popular. In this part of the performance, the key and difficult point is to show the harmony color of the part of the chord. Here, all the notes in the chord must not be played down solidly. If there is no primary or secondary, the audience will not be able to appreciate the melody line of the work. Therefore, while practicing this part, the chord needs to be decomposed the main melody line needs to be analyzed, and then be put it into practice. The changing trend of harmony color needs to be listened carefully.

5. Conclusion

Through the above analysis, the musical structure of Tchaikovsky’s “June: Barcarolle” is composed of compound ternary form. The music reflects Tchaikovsky’s early creative style, uses lyrical and poetic melody to move people’s hearts, and depicts the pleasant, quiet and natural scenery. The happiness of Russians in the field in this piece is also exquisitely expressed in Tchaikovsky’s works. Its melody exudes a warm, simple atmosphere, fresh and smooth, lyrical and charming melody with some melancholy and sentimental tone. The composer’s exquisite creation technology also makes it an enduring music work, which is widely played and used in teaching.

Disclosure statement

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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