



Nadeshda von Meck

Nadeshda von Meck (orig.: Надежда Филаретовна фон Мек)

Birth name: Nadeshda Filaretowna Frolowskaja

* 29 January 1831 in Snamenskoje, Gouvernement Smolensk

† 1 January 1894 in Nizza,

Patron, music and art enthusiast, amateur pianist

"Music puts me into a state of intoxication like a glass of sherry, and I find this condition beautiful and noble. One is mysteriously propelled into somewhere enigmatic and unknown, carried away into a world whose magic is so great that one would be willing to die in this condition."

(Nadezhda von Meck to Peter I. Tchaikovsky on 29 November (11 December) 1877, in: Ena von Bauer, Hans Petzold (ed.). *Teure Freundin. Peter Iljitsch Tschaikowski in seinen Briefen an Nadeshda von Meck*. Leipzig 1964, p. 123)

Profile

Nadezhda von Meck was a renowned patron and the confidant, muse and pen friend of Peter Ilyich Tchaikovsky. She later supported other composers and musicians as well, including Nikolai Rubinstein, Henryk Wieniawski and Claude Debussy.

Cities and countries

The entrepreneurial and social activities of the von Meck family developed on Russian soil during the course of the 19th century. At the focal point of Nadezhda von Meck's interest as a patron were, above all, musicians and composers, including Peter I. Tchaikovsky and Nikolai Rubinstein.

Biography

Nadezhda Filaretovna von Meck was born into the family of a landowner, Filaret Vassilyevich Frolovsky, who was related to the best-known noble families in the Administrative District of Smolensk and owned approximately one hectare of land. Nadezhda Filaretovna inherited her passion for music from her father, who played the violin. She apparently owed her extraordinary business acumen, strong character, ambition and strength of will to her mother, Anastassiya Dimitriyevna, née Potyomkina. Nadezhda Filaretovna received a domestic education typical of the nobility in those days, which included instruction in manners, foreign languages, literature and history as well as piano lessons.

At the age of seventeen, she married the nobleman Karl Fyodorovich (Karl Georg Otto) von Meck (1821-1876), whose antecedents had immigrated to Livonia from Silesia during the late 16th century. Eighteen children were born during the course of this marriage, of which eleven reached adult age. Karl von Meck initially earned his livelihood as an engineer and construction inspector of the state railways in Western Russia. However, he gave up this secure position, which allowed him but little individual initiative; he was strengthened in this decision by his energetic wife, who shied away from no risks and also supported her husband in business matters. The family, which had lived very modestly at first, soon enjoyed genuine luxury after Karl von Meck had developed into one of those magnates whom the politician Sergei Yulyevich Witte aptly described as the "railway kings of Russia". Karl von Meck stood out from other railway magnates by virtue of his special honesty and sincerity. Although Ser-

gei Witte made disparaging, sarcastic comments about many Russian entrepreneurs, considering them "capitalistic sharks", he described Karl von Meck as a "very proper German" (Sergei Jul'evič Vitte. *Vospominanija [Reminiscences]*, Vol. 1. Moscow 1960, p. 126).

When Karl von Meck died in 1876, he left his wife a house in Moscow, an estate in Brailov (in the present-day Ukraine), a fortune of several million roubles and the control of two railways. Nadezhda von Meck lived very reclusively from now on. She sold one of the railways and successfully directed the other one with her brother Alexander and her eldest son Vladimir. The life of her extended family and the upbringing of her numerous children was supported by several domestic employees, servants, teachers, etc. The employees also included a musician who taught the children and played music with the lady of the house. The greater part of the household was led and dominated by Nadezhda von Meck.

Nadezhda von Meck lent her support to various musicians. This circle included Nikolai Rubinstein, whose talent the patron greatly admired. The seriously ill violinist and composer Henryk Wieniawski was a guest in her house in 1880. During the same year, Claude Debussy was employed in her house as musician and as her piano partner, and he accompanied her on a journey to Switzerland, France and Italy.

At the centre of her passion for music stood the oeuvre of Peter Ilyich Tchaikovsky, whose orchestral fantasy "The Tempest", Op. 18 profoundly impressed her. In 1876 Nadezhda von Meck commissioned the composer through the violinist Jossif Kotek, a former theory pupil of Tchaikovsky who was in her employment at the time, to compose a piece for violin and piano for a generous fee. Beginning in December 1876, the two were bound by a unique, almost fourteen-year-long correspondence during the course of which 1204 letters were exchanged. In these letters, they agreed that the correspondence partners would renounce personal encounters. They saw each other at a distance during a few isolated chance encounters over the course of time, but they exchanged no words. Tchaikovsky, however, was invited to Nadezhda von Meck's estate several times during periods of her absence. In addition, the two correspondents were occasionally in the same places abroad at the same time. These stays, however, were regulated in such a way that a direct meeting never took place. At chance would have it, they became "relatives": in 1883 a son of Nadezhda von Meck, Nikolai (1863-1929), who later became one of Russia's most im-

portant railway entrepreneurs, married Tchaikovsky's niece Anna Lvovna Davidova (1864-1942).

The generous material support from Nadezhda von Meck, who from late 1877 onwards paid Tchaikovsky an annuity of 6000 roubles - an enormous sum at that time - brought financial independence to the composer. She made it possible for him to give up his unloved teaching activity at the Moscow Conservatory and to live as a free composer, to travel abroad and lead a very comfortable life. Thanks to Nadezhda von Meck's support, Tchaikovsky was able to regulate his financial obligations resulting from his divorce, which meant that he did not have to fear any further claims following the termination of the failed marriage.

Tchaikovsky proved his gratitude towards the generous patron time and time again; the dedication of his Symphony No. 4 (1877) to "my friend" became particularly well known (his refusal to name her was in accordance with Nadezhda von Meck's wishes).

Nadezhda von Meck also gave moral support to the composer, who tended towards depression. This friendship at a distance was of great significance for the composer and doubtless gave him important stability during the time of his most serious crisis from the mid-1870s to the end of the decade, which nearly took him to the point of suicide. And later, too, the pen friendship continued to prove very fruitful for the composer's production. Amongst other things, Nadezhda von Meck encouraged him to continue composing after his Symphony No. 5 had been savagely attacked by the critics.

According to present knowledge, Tchaikovsky received a (lost) letter from Nadezhda von Meck on 22 September (4 October) 1890, in which she declared the correspondence and the annuity to be terminated. The supposed reason for this decision - serious financial losses - is meanwhile disputed. Another reason, namely that Nadezhda von Meck had found out about Tchaikovsky's homosexuality at precisely this time, also appears improbable. Rather, this decision was most likely influenced by the fact that Tchaikovsky had been receiving an annuity of 3000 roubles from Tsar Alexander III beginning in 1888. Nadezhda von Meck's weakened physical health may also have meant that she was no longer able to exercise control over her businesses alone and was forced to comply with the claims of her relatives, some of whom were apparently not in agreement with the payment of the annuity to Tchaikovsky.

Soon after Tchaikovsky's death, Nadezhda von Meck died in Nice of tuberculosis. According to her daughter-in-law Anna von Meck, she could not get over Tchaikovsky's death (Anthony Holden. *Tchaikovsky: A Biography*, N.Y., 1995, p. 401).

Appreciation

The correspondence between Tchaikovsky and Nadezhda von Meck was published for the first time in 1934-1936 in a letter collection comprising three volumes (Čajkovskij, P. I. *Perepiska s N. F. fon Meck* [Correspondence with N. F. von Meck]. 3 volumes., ed. W. A. Shdanow and N. T. Shegin. Moscow/Leningrad 1934-1936). This edition was reprinted in 2004 in Moscow (Čajkovskij i Nadežda Filaretovna fon Meck. *Perepiska v 3 tomach* [Tchaikovsky and Nadezhda Filaretovna von Meck. Correspondence in 3 Volumes] Moscow 2004).

The German edition by Ena von Bauer and Hans Petzold (ed.), "Teure Freundin". Peter Iljitsch Tschaikowski in seinen Briefen an Nadeshda von Meck (Leipzig 1964) offers a careful selection of letters translated at a very high level. This edition is, to the present day, one of the most important sources for German-speaking Tchaikovsky research.

"Tchaikovsky's relationship to Nadezhda Filaretovna von Meck has something unique about it, and is hardly paralleled in other artists' biographies", as Constantin Floros characterises the unusual pen friendship (Constantin Floros. *Peter Tschaikowsky*. Reinbek 2006, p. 41). The exchange of letters was of great importance for both correspondents, and it offers very valuable information about the biography of the composer, who depicts his travels, impressions, moods, etc. in great detail in the letters, as well as about his production, e.g. the origins of his works and his aesthetic and artistic tendencies, convictions and philosophical-religious views. In Nadezhda von Meck, the composer found a congenial and competent music enthusiast, and a person of great empathy and sensitivity. When the correspondence occasionally became polemical, Tchaikovsky also appreciated this, for it inspired him to formulate his ideas clearly.

During the 1880s the character of the correspondence gradually changed; it became less emotional and increasingly objective. The time intervals between the letters also increased, which could be explained not least by the fragile health of Nadezhda von Meck, who suffered from tuberculosis and atrophy of the arm.

The correspondence not only reveals Tchaikovsky, an ingenious composer, with his character traits, strengths and weaknesses as a person with all of his ups and downs. It also reflects an extraordinary woman whose multi-layered and complex personality structure did not correspond to the clichés of her time and brought up many taboos. In a most highly intelligent, sensitive and (self) critical manner, Nadezhda von Meck demonstrates in her letters an astonishing capacity for unsparing reflection: bound to an enormously large family, she comments sceptically and at times negatively on the institution of marriage. Almost proudly, she speaks about her own "unfemininity", maintaining that she is "very unsympathetic in her personal relationships"; she depicts the climate in her own family as being one of "cameraderie" and rather "masculine" (cited from Alexander Poznansky. *Tchaikovsky: The Quest for the Inner Man*. N.Y., etc., 1993, p. 198). Averse to all sentimentality, she refers to herself in her letter to Tchaikovsky of 12 (24) November 1877 as "pantheistic" and her religion as "ideal materialism" (cited from Ena von Bauer, Hans Petzold (ed.). *Teure Freundin*. Peter Iljitsch Tschaikowski in seinen Briefen an Nadeshda von Meck. Leipzig 1964, p. 107). Taken as a whole, this correspondence conveys the impression that Nadezhda von Meck was very unsociable, torn by conflicts between the material and the ideal, between practical life and art. She appears to have been a free spirit in hostile social circumstances.

Reception

From the very beginning, great importance has been attached to the relationship between Tchaikovsky and Nadezhda von Meck in Russian Tchaikovsky literature. The correspondence between the two has been and is still frequently cited in Russian and Soviet literature and assessed as the most important source for the understanding of the life and oeuvre of the composer.

The biography of the composer written by Tchaikovsky's brother brought about disputes over this (Čajkovskij, Modest. *Žizn' Petra Il'iča Čajkovskogo* [The Life of Peter Ilyich Tchaikovsky]. 3 volumes. Moscow/Leipzig 1900-1902), for Modest Ilyich Tchaikovsky explained the sudden break between the composer and his patron, amongst other things, by maintaining that the rich lady had simply lost interest in Tchaikovsky. His presentation and interpretation of the events are possibly explained by the complex relationship between the Tchaikovsky brothers and, not least, by a certain envy on the part of Modest Ilyich Tschaikovsky.

In 1939 the German film "Es war eine rauschende Ballnacht" ("It Was a Gay Ball Night") was produced in 1939 (director and producer: Carl Froelich), in which Tchaikovsky's biography was portrayed in a very free manner (script: Géza von Cziffra). This first melodramatic and naive attempt at filming Tchaikovsky's life is of lasting historical significance, especially thanks to the acting achievements of Zarah Leander (Katharina Alexandrovna Murakina), Marika Röck (dancer Nastassia Petrovna Yarova) and Hans Stüwe (Tchaikovsky). <http://www.filmportal.de/df/ca/Uebersicht,,,,,,,,,165DA82CBB7242C1855A0456884AA144,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,.html>

The Soviet film "Tchaikovsky" (director: Igor Talankin) based on the correspondence between Peter I. Tchaikovsky and Nadeshda von Meck (Tchaikovsky: Innokenti Smoktunovsky; Nadeshda von Meck: Antonina Shuranova) was made in 1969.
<http://www.ruskino.ru/mov/2993>

The British biographical film "The Music Lovers" (German title "Genie und Wahnsinn") based on the collection of letters edited by Catherine Drinker Bowen and Barbara von Meck with Richard Chamberlain as Tchaikovsky and Izabella Telezynska as Nadeshda von Meck was made in 1970 (director and producer: Ken Russell).
http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Music_Lovers

Research

In Russian Tchaikovsky literature, great importance was attached to the relationship between Tchaikovsky and Nadeshda von Meck from the beginning. The correspondence between the two was and still is frequently cited in Russian, Soviet and German literature and assessed as the most important source for the understanding of the life and production of the composer.

Need for Research

A number of biographical circumstances in the life of Nadeshda von Meck, including the termination of the correspondence with Tchaikovsky in 1890, require further clarification. Comprehensive searches for archive material and its appraisal have yet to be undertaken. The question concerning the correlation between the correspondence and Tchaikovsky's creative process also requires scholarly discussion, as does the correspondents' constant polemic concerning questions of philosophy and world view (Tchaikovsky's active interest in idealism and mysticism,

for example, was ignored or misinterpreted in Soviet musicological research).

Authority control

Virtual International Authority File (VIAF):

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Deutsche Nationalbibliothek (GND):

<http://d-nb.info/gnd/118845454>

Library of Congress (LCCN):

<http://lcn.loc.gov/n90600207>

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Marina Lobanova, 12. Juli 2009

Editing status

Editorial staff: Regina Back

Translation: David Babcock

First edit 08/10/2009

Last edit 14/03/2018

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