



## The Wife of Tchaikovsky

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On July 6/18, 1877, Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky (the composer of *The Nutcracker*, *Swan Lake*, and the *1812 Overture*) stood before Antonina Ivanovna Milyukova in St. George's Church in Moscow, Russia. Today was his wedding day, and his brother Anatoli and former lover Iosif Kotek were there to share the moment. In this moment, standing before his future wife, he certainly must have begun regretting proposing to her, because just days into his marriage, he began seeking ways to free him of this grave mistake and release himself from her clutches.

The pair had known each other for several years prior to their courtship. Antonina's sister-in-law Anastasia Milyukova (née Khvostova) had known Tchaikovsky from his days as a student at the

School of Jurisprudence in Saint Petersburg, and she introduced him to Antonina in her and her husband's home in May of 1872. Antonina would later recall that this meeting would leave a lasting impression on her, and it was that day she fell in love with him. Currently, the two had only been acquaintances. They remained acquaintances while she attended the Moscow Conservatory, the school that Tchaikovsky held a teaching position at, and remained acquainted due to proximity. It was not until Antonina received a small inheritance from the division of her family estate that she decided to pursue Tchaikovsky as she had longed to do for quite some time.

Her first letter came to him in March/April of 1877. This letter contained her professions of love for him, and it sparked a correspondence between the two. By May, she had already expressed interest in getting married to him, but the two had yet to meet since their correspondence began. By late May/early June, the couple decided to meet for the first time privately. Three days later, they met once again. In their second meeting, Tchaikovsky proposed to Antonina, but only offering her his "brotherly love". Antonina accepted his proposal and terms, and they were wed within a month (a month in which Tchaikovsky was away in Glebovo at the Shilovsky family estate to write his opera *Eugene Onegin*).



Before I go further into the couple's relationship after their wedding day, I would like to elaborate upon the rocky foundation their relationship was built upon. For starters, Tchaikovsky was a homosexual. He was not openly gay, but his youngest brothers knew of his secret. This should not come as that much of a surprised because I mentioned in the first paragraph that Iosif Kotek was a former lover of his. Secondly, around the same time, Tchaikovsky began writing his opera *Eugene Onegin*. The opera's plot eerily reminded the composer of his relationship with Antonina (she writes to him, an uninterested bachelor, to profess her love), and he desperately wished to avoid a fate that resembled the protagonist of his newest project. If you wish to know more about how *Eugene Onegin* and Tchaikovsky's early relationship with Antonina align with each other, listen to episode one of my podcast, [The Composer Chronicles](#).

Their first meeting was initiated by Antonina after she sent him a letter that contained threats to commit suicide if he did not agree to meet with her. It is unclear whether Tchaikovsky knew this letter to be a sample from a "letter book", a popular book at the time with containing samples of various letter templates. What we do know is that after this letter, Tchaikovsky agreed to meet with her. Whatever his reasonings were, there was no easy way out of the situation he was in. He had been trying to set a good example for his siblings by repressing his homosexuality and marrying a woman in order to stay out of illegal activity. He wrote this to his brother Modest in August of 1876 in a letter, stating that he was specifically doing this for Modest. Modest was also a closeted homosexual, and he and his brother often confided in each other about the matter.

After Tchaikovsky's marriage to Antonina, he began to suffer gratefully from the predicament that he put himself into. He was not free from his homosexual tendencies (a freedom he desired as expressed in letters to Modest after revealing his plan to find a wife) and he was tremendously incompatible with his new spouse. Twenty days after their wedding, Tchaikovsky left Antonina for a trip to Kamenka for one and a half months to visit his sister, Aleksandra. In mid-September, Tchaikovsky returned home to Moscow, but just over a week from his return, he left his wife again with the intention of never returning to her. He contrived a fictitious meeting in Saint Petersburg to attend to, and then faked a nervous breakdown when finally free from Antonina to initiate their separation.

Between 1877 and 1880, Tchaikovsky tried to divorce Antonina several times, but she continued to reject attempts believing that he would one day reconcile with her and return as her loving husband. However, Tchaikovsky began to feel bad for his wife for abandoning her. He confronted his publisher, Pyotr Jurgenson, and asked him to locate his wife so that he could assist materially. It was during that time that she had three illegitimate children by Aleksandr Aleksandrovich Shlykov, who was a lawyer that Antonina lived with starting in May of 1880. She would eventually surrender the children to a state orphanage in Moscow to give them a better life.

Many scholars look upon Antonina as unhinged and then later to be vengeful, but not everything that happened to either Tchaikovsky or Antonina were completely negative. After his marriage, Tchaikovsky stopped believing his homosexuality to be a burden that he could free himself from despite consistently be afraid of her disclosing his sexuality. Although she refused to divorce him, she continued to speak highly of him. One of her ultimate signs of respect for him surfaced when she gave up her children. She refused to provide a surname for the children, as her situation was not entirely legal, in an act to keep her husband from political shame.

Tchaikovsky believed his marriage to Antonina to be the biggest mistake of his life. He would refer to her as a wound because of her childishness and refusal to comply with his wishes. He knew he made a mistake, and only wished to free himself and her from the emotional turmoil that would eventually come. In his will, he would leave her with a pension of 100 rubles a month to ensure that his wife would stay healthy. Despite her being such a terrible thorn in his side, Tchaikovsky would still seek out ways to ensure she was safe, and she would do the same for him.