



Photo: Lorenzo Spoleti

Tell Tchaikovsky the News

By Larry Katz

Music can surprise you. It can sneak into your head, penetrate your soul and become a part of you, sometimes against all expectations.

More than 30 years ago, Dawn Carroll was a hard rock singer when she heard a piece by Tchaikovsky that has stuck with her ever since. It wasn't one of the Russian composer's beloved greatest hits like "The Nutcracker" or "Swan Lake" or a movement from one of his sweeping romantic piano concertos. It was the 5th movement of "Moscow" a cantata (a piece for voices with instrumental accompaniment) that most classical musical lovers, even Tchaikovsky fans, have never even heard of.

Now Carroll and her collaborators have transformed Tchaikovsky's work by adding a modern beat and electronic sounds for 'Songs for Mary' the soundtrack to a musical theater piece, "If the Walls Could Talk" inspired by African American musical pioneer Mary Caldwell Dawson.

"I first discovered the piece" Carroll said, "thanks to a wonderful opera singer named Jessica Locke. I was going to Berklee College of Music, where I studied music

production and management. But when I first went there, I was a vocalist, a rock 'n' roller. Rock singers are always trying to hit those high notes without making their vocal cords bleed. I was studying with Jessica around the time Axl Rose came out with "Welcome to the Jungle" and that's when I realized that, okay, my vocal cords just can't do that."

"But Jessica and I became very good friends. She was recording an album and this piece by Tchaikovsky happened to be on it. It was a piece that has never left me, even though I'm more a rock 'n' roller. It was just hauntingly beautiful. I just never forgot it. I could hum it in my head almost note for note. I left Boston and moved to California to pursue music production, but the piece never left me. It was one of those songs that just enter your brain for no reason. Sometimes I would find myself barreling along skating in Venice Beach and the song would start playing in my head. It was simply unforgettable."

Tchaikovsky wrote "Moscow" a six-movement cantata, in 1883. It was a rush job. He was living in Paris when he was commissioned to write a piece to celebrate the coronation of the new czar, Alexander III. Despite having to race to meet a two-week deadline, Tchaikovsky would write that 'I consider it to be among the best of my compositions.'

Despite its loveliness and immediate appeal, "Moscow;" has remained little-known. But, it occurred to Carroll, it was not at all unlikely that Mary Caldwell Dawson, the classically-trained founder of the Nation Negro Opera Company in Pittsburgh, would have been familiar with it. Her show about Dawson offered an opportunity to use this music that had lived inside Carroll for so long.

"It's a show that talks about opera through the eyes of a hip-hop artist" Dawson said.

"Well, what would happen if you take this piece by Tchaikovsky and take some hip-hop sounds and throw it into a blender?"

To accomplish this unlikely mash-up, Carroll called on Nashville-based producer/composer Danny Borgers, who previously had collaborated on some of the songs Carroll wrote with Boston rock legend Jon Butcher for 'Songs for Mary'.

"I had done orchestration type stuff for several songs that Dawn and Jon wrote" Borgers said, "but this one was a little

bit outside of the norm. I was trained as a classical pianist, but I had never heard of the piece. I didn't even know the name of it. So I took a deep dive finding out what it was and then reading more about it. Dawn wanted me to add some hip-hop to it and I thought, 'Well, that's interesting'. I had to speed it up a little. And then I bought a (software) program called something like Opera Singer for the vocal part. I made it wordless and there was a good reason for that. The original lyrics were in Russian. Then they were re-done after Stalin took over to make it more of a Soviet thing. The English lyrics that I found were in the vein of sacred music. But using the program I was able to create a vocal with no lyrics."

Listening to the result, you would not guess that the flowing melody is not the voice of an actual human, but was put together from samples. This re-imagined 5th movement ("Arioso") of "Moscow" retains the touching beauty of Tchaikovsky's original. You could call it a musical magic trick. "It's something that brings all the generations together" Carroll said. "It's a classical piece that caught the ear of me, a rock'n'roller. And now it's being introduced to hip-hop. Fusing those styles together was so much fun."

Carroll laughed. "I just can't imagine what Tchaikovsky would say."



Photo: Denisse Leon