

the two books. With a flurry of commotion and with true superhero pizzazz, Wally and Boom Boom help apprehend the crooks.

Kropp's characters in *Ski Stooges*, if not bigger than life like those in the Korman and Godfrey books, at least manage the heroic and make us laugh in the process. Fred, who is brought on a skiing holiday as baby sitter for Justin and Jason, is a klutz, an improbable hero with a physical appearance that would scare crows. Fun revolves around Fred's love life as the boys attempt to help him connect with Chantal, the gorgeous ski instructor. Along the way they are helped by Oscar, the computer, who gives dubious romantic advice. Much of what keeps interest active in this book is the visual and uncomplicated slap-stick humour. When Jason and Justin's father tries to control a careening snowmobile, a snowman in his path is demolished. When the snow flakes settle, dad has the snowman's carrot nose in his mouth.

Korman, Godfrey, and Kropp have admirable talent for writing funny dialogue, describing absurd situations, and for creating off-the-wall characters, all with which young people can readily connect. However, these books lack open-ended spaces where questions can arise and where imagination can go to speculate on the unknown. All have happy endings where everything is explained, settled, or is confidently resolved. Nevertheless, they are lighthearted romps for youngsters who might otherwise shy away from reading.

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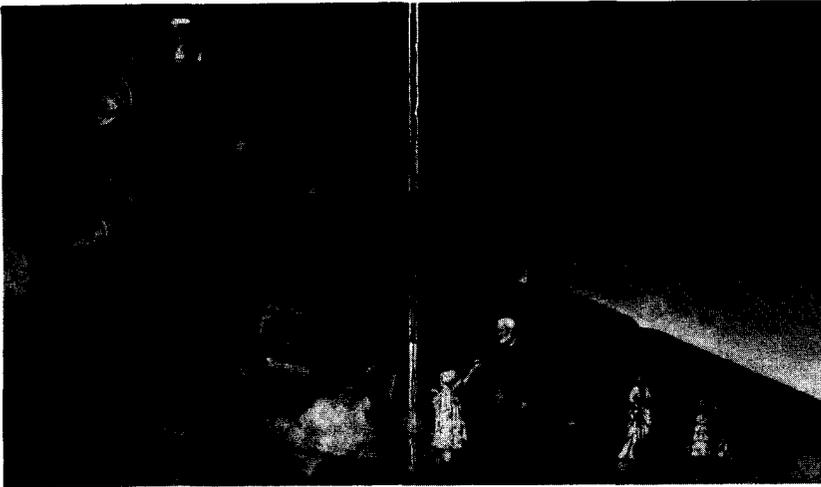
## A CHILD DISCOVERS TCHAIKOVSKY

**Tchaikovsky Discovers America.** Esther Kalman. Illus. Laura Fernandez, Rick Jacobson. Lester Publishing, 1994. Unpag., \$16.95 cloth. ISBN 1-89555-82-5.

Tchaikovsky remains one of the most popular of the "classical" composers in North America today. He is also the creator of music that is very accessible to children. This book, based on the award-winning cassette/compact disc produced by Susan Hammond, is an introduction which is admirable on several accounts.

First, the composer is introduced to the North American child on home ground: the fictional eleven-year-old child of Russian immigrants living in New York meets the famous composer during his visit to the United States and (briefly) to Canada in 1891. The details of his trip are true, taken from the letters and diaries of the composer as translated in various publications which the author lists on the reverse of the title page.

Second, the themes brought out in the story are important ones in the life and music of the composer and correspond to what the growing child will learn if he or she pursues this interest in later life. While committed to honesty, the author has omitted a great many details about Tchaikovsky which are unsuitable, in the minds of many, to a children's book. Indeed, the very concept of presenting only



so much of the truth is built into the story itself: the composer tells the young Eugenia part of the story of *Swan Lake*, but refrains from completing the tragic ending. We could say the same of *Tchaikovsky Discovers America*; the author has managed to catch the spirit of some of Tchaikovsky's music without completing the details of what the fly-leaf calls his "tormented" life.

The most prominent theme in the book is that of nostalgia, for Russia, for an elusive world just beyond one's grasp, for an unnamed, unfulfillable desire. This feeling, not easy to convey to a child, is suggested by Tchaikovsky's conversation with the young girl on the impossibility of either of them ever dancing at the *Maryinsky Theatre* in St. Petersburg or its equivalent. Even at eleven, then, the girl must face the fact of an ardently wished-for experience being forever beyond her grasp. For the adult which the child-reader will become, the sense of yearning is evoked in different ways: the young girl is named Eugenia, after Eugene Onegin of Tchaikovsky's tragic opera. The immigrant parents yearn for their homeland where, in words the author puts into Tchaikovsky's mouth, "the roof is falling in." This allusion to unspecified political events, perhaps those of 1861, 1905 or 1917, seems to relate to the author's perceptions of Russia, not Tchaikovsky's, at least as described in recent biographies.

In fact, the second prominent theme in the book is the contrast between the faltering Russia and the successful America. One even begins to suspect a chauvinistic element in the portrayal, especially in light of the events of 1991 and American reactions to them, exactly a century after this story takes place. The suspicion is perhaps unfounded, but it does come to mind. Hence, when the very last illustration of the book, placed on the verso of the last page of text, shows the composer looking back from shipboard at the Statue of Liberty enshrouded in mist, one suspects that the effect is there for American sensibilities. But no, the composer actually did take a final look at the statue as he left New York harbour on the "Prince Bismarck" bound for Hamburg.

The illustrations for *Tchaikovsky Discovers America* are oil paintings, whose textures are evident on the printed page, done in the style of artwork of the late-nineteenth century (specified on the flyleaf). Their historical accuracy constitutes an essential element in the narrative, evoking their own sense of nostalgia for the adult of today. The example of the last illustration, mentioned above, shows the way in which they are integrated into the narration, adding to the story some elements left out of the text. In addition they are beautiful in themselves, presenting wonderful images of trains, drawing rooms, concert halls, and natural settings.

The emphasis on the train as the symbol for all that seemed splendid about America to Tchaikovsky is grounded in his actual amazement at the luxury afforded by American hotels and the straightforward, courteous and genuinely friendly service afforded him. Equally amazing to him was the unaffected modesty of Andrew Carnegie, whose Music Hall Tchaikovsky had been invited to inaugurate (the description of the concert itself is historically accurate) and the way that material interests did not prevent Americans of this type from taking an active interest in the arts. With hindsight, too, the choice of the train has a special resonance because the real-life Russian counterpart of the girl's father, Savva Mamontov (1841-1918), was also an extremely important patron of the arts. In 1904 his railway fortune, source of support for such Russian genius as Diaghilev and Chaliapin, was confiscated by the Czarist government on trumped-up charges, and the former philanthropist reduced to poverty. This may have happened long after the death of Tchaikovsky but it illustrates the reality of the theme of America-the-prosperous contrasting with Russia, where the roof is always falling in.

The more one reads this book and checks its presentation of an important composer and his music, the more one admires the way in which the facts and feelings about both have been shaped for the minds of the young.

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## OCEAN, OCEAN, BURNING BRIGHT

**Aska's Sea Creatures.** Poems by David Day. Illus. Warabé Aska. Doubleday, 1994. 32 pp., \$18.95 cloth. ISBN 0-385-32107-4.

Warabé Aska has produced another brilliant picture book, *Aska's Sea Creatures*. Poetry is provided by David Day, and very good poetry it is. It is not Day's fault that the visuals here overwhelm the text. One cannot help but feel that these little poems deserve a chance to shine in their own right. Here they provide a very quiet oboe accompaniment to a virtual army chorus of powerfully aggressive voices.

From the blinding flash of the opening endpaper to the end of the book, readers are led through one of the brightest colour experiences to be found anywhere. This world is on and under the waves of the sea, and over it all burns the sun, hot red and fiery yellow. Filtered through the waves it casts luminescence and shadows such as we earthbound creatures can scarcely imagine. This sun shines on the sea creatures who love it and play with it. At times it is bounced