



TCHAIKOVSKY

The Doll's Funeral from Album for the Young op 39

Teacher and author **Melanie Spanswick** shows you how to develop subtle legato, an excellent tone and a good balance between the hands so you can play this melodic Romantic miniature beautifully

Ability rating Beginner

Info

Key: C minor
Tempo: Grave
Style: Late Romantic

Will improve your

✓ Legato playing
✓ Sound gradation
✓ Balance between the hands

A cycle of 24 piano miniatures, Tchaikovsky's *Album for the Young* was dedicated to the composer's favourite nephew, Vladimir Davydov. It is subtitled '24 simple pieces à la Schumann', in a nod to the German composer's *Album for the Young*.

This sombre yet melodic little piece is full of drama and pathos. 'The Doll's Funeral' succeeds 'The Sick Doll', and appears fairly straightforward, however, it does have several challenging elements that make it an excellent study for the beginning or even intermediate pianist.

With a time signature of 2/4, the piece has the distinct feel of a march, albeit a slow, stately one. The key of C minor adds to the bleak character, and it could conceivably be played very slowly for a tragic, melodramatic effect. You will likely find the metronome marking of crotchet equals 50 beats per minute to be a suitably solemn speed.

Start by listening to house pianist Chenyin Li's recording of this piece on the covermount CD. This will provide the necessary overview with regards to pulse, rhythm and dynamics. Examine the key of C minor carefully before you start, playing the scale and arpeggio a few times, noting where all three flats occur and particularly observing the sharpened seventh.

Even if learning the notes doesn't prove too difficult, you'll have several issues to surmount to master this work musically. 'The Doll's Funeral' consists of four-bar phrases, and the dotted rhythm in the melody needs rigorous articulation to sound convincing, in a way that resembles the music for a funeral procession. Try sub-dividing the crotchet beat into semiquavers by counting four regular beats to each crotchet (or set a semiquaver metronome pulse). When you count out loud, be sure that whenever you encounter the rhythmic pattern of dotted quaver-semiquaver in the melody (on beat



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two in bars 1 and 2, and many times thereafter) that you play the semiquaver precisely on beat number four. Lighten this semiquaver in each phrase, playing it with slightly less force. This will also help to phrase each musical sentence.

Slow works such as this call for excellent tonal balance and sound variation. Fingering is crucial, and some of my suggested fingering are in the score. Once you have assimilated the fingering, learn the piece hands separately, ensuring every single note in both hands is entirely joined and smooth. There should be very few gaps in the sound. This may prove tricky where chords are concerned, and is especially true in the left hand (LH), where much of the passagework is chordal. Aim to join all the notes without using any pedal, as this will be added later. Working without the sustaining pedal is a very useful exercise and will improve your legato playing immeasurably, encouraging attentive listening right until the end of each note.

One way of practising perfect chordal legato and balance is to employ a very flexible, free wrist. Make a circular motion with your wrist as you move slowly from one chord to the next. Try to find the point in the key bed where the sound actually manifests (it's akin to finding the 'biting point' of the clutch in a car). Once you have found this point, practise taking the keys (or notes in each chord) up and down with precision and total coordination, so that all the notes sound at exactly the same moment. Experiment with colour, noticing the amount of arm weight and movement required to play *pianissimo* and similarly *fortissimo*. Grading the sound in this way can be a useful technique allowing for copious tonal possibilities. Much of the piece is quiet, so it's worth exploring as many soft dynamics as possible.

Once chords are fluently joined, they will need careful voicing or balancing. This is particularly important in the right hand (RH), where the top of the chord is the melodic line. At bars 3 and 4, and at bars 29, 30 and 31 (the climax), you will need strong fourth and fifth fingers. When practising, play on the tips of your fingers and arch your hand accordingly, as the fingers should move independently from the knuckles and the hand must not appear collapsed (imagine you are grasping a ball). Balance the hand so there is plenty of weight directed at the

Learning Tip

Experiment with colour – find out just how softly you can play while ensuring all the notes sound

weaker fingers (bars 4 and 5). Playing the notes in the chord separately can help, but you'll need secure coordination and imagination to project, highlight, and 'sing' the melody effectively, above and beyond the other musical material (keep the LH chords soft).

Observe the musical directions throughout. Close attention to the crucial crescendo and diminuendo markings (bars 5-8, 22-32), as well as to the overall dynamics and the phrase marks will enhance your interpretation. If you are a more advanced player, try adding the *una corda* pedal to the first phrase, for a muted opening.

Aim to achieve a good legato with your fingers alone. This will suppress the desire for excessive pedal. A little sustaining pedal creates drama, space and clarity without obscuring harmonic progressions. It's so easy to over-pedal in a Romantic miniature, but a cleaner approach with efficient finger legato allows for clearer articulation and ultimately a more compelling performance. ■