

PYOTR ILYICH TCHAIKOVSKY Symphony No. 4 in F minor, Op. 36

BORN: May 7, 1840, in Kamsko-Votkinsk, Vyatka province, Russia

DIED: November 6, 1893, in Saint Petersburg

WORK COMPOSED: 1877-78

WORLD PREMIERE: February 22, 1878, in Moscow at a concert of the Russian Musical Society, Nicolai Rubinstein conducting

Despite his successes, Tchaikovsky's entire life was punctuated with a series of personal crises and bouts of depression. Although he showed musical talent at a young age, Tchaikovsky's parents felt that he should have a career that would be financially supportive. So, when he was ten years old he was sent to the Imperial School of Jurisprudence in Saint Petersburg (the most prestigious boarding school in Russia), which was 800 miles from his home and family, where he would be trained as a civil servant. This separation was traumatic for the young Pyotr Ilyich and the effects were intensified when his mother died of cholera four years later. After his schooling was completed he spent three years as a civil servant and then began his studies in music at the Russian Musical Society. He was a talented student, so much so that upon graduation he was offered a professorship at the new Moscow Conservatory, a post he would hold until 1878. In 1877 Tchaikovsky experienced a devastating blow and if it weren't for the love and friendship of his benefactor Nadezhda von Meck, some of the most powerful and beautiful music the world has ever known might not have been written.

Tchaikovsky began his correspondences with the recently widowed von Meck in December 1876. Von Meck's husband was a skillful engineer and her savvy business acumen made them very wealthy. She was enchanted with Tchaikovsky's music, and although they corresponded over the span of fourteen years, they agreed to never meet in person. Their letters have given us one of the greatest "epistolary exchanges in Western music." (To give you an idea of the volume of letters, in 1993 Oxford University Press published a collection of their letters from December 1876 – December 1878. 424 pages!) Not only do these letters contain a wealth of Tchaikovsky's thoughts about his music, they became very personal and therapeutic for him.

In May 1877 Tchaikovsky received a letter from Antonina Milyukova, who claimed to be a former student. She declared that she was madly in love with him and that if she couldn't have him she would kill herself. You can see where this is headed, can't you? Tchaikovsky took a break from composing and met Antonina and in a day or two, he proposed. Instead of celebrating he kept the upcoming nuptials a secret; he didn't even write of it to von Meck until three days before the wedding. He wrote that he "lived thirty-seven years with an innate aversion to marriage... In a day or two my marriage will take place. What will happen after that, I do not know."

More recent research disputes much of this story, suggesting that there was no blackmail and that Antonina was not a stranger. One thought is that the marriage would end speculations into Tchaikovsky's homosexuality, although he apparently stressed to Antonina that their marriage would be platonic. Another consideration had to do with money. Before von Meck began sending him allowances later in 1877, Tchaikovsky was having serious financial difficulties of which he wrote to Antonina, who was coming into an inheritance. Regardless of the reasons, Tchaikovsky and Antonina were married on July 18, 1877.

Two weeks after his ill-fated marriage to Antonina, fearing for his sanity Tchaikovsky fled to his sister's estate in the Ukraine. He returned to Antonina in Moscow in September and within ten days, feeling ill, fled to Saint Petersburg where he suffered a nervous breakdown. For about two weeks Tchaikovsky lay unconscious. Ultimately his doctor, seeing him like this, ordered a new life for him – one without Antonina. Antonina published her memoirs six months after Tchaikovsky's death stating that their separation resulted from people accusing her of stifling his creativity. Their marriage lasted only about two or three months, although they never divorced. In October Tchaikovsky's brother, Anatoly, took him to Switzerland and then on to Paris and Italy. Feeling rejuvenated, Tchaikovsky requested that the unfinished manuscript of his Fourth Symphony be sent from Moscow so it could be completed.

Tchaikovsky began composing his Fourth Symphony in May 1877 and completed it on January 19, 1878. To put this work in context, Brahms completed his Second Symphony in 1877 and Bruckner finished the second version of his Fourth Symphony and finished his Fifth Symphony in 1878. The traditional musical form of the symphony, developed mostly by Germanic composers, was analytical and focused on the architecture. This was natural for composers such as Mozart and Beethoven, but that form didn't offer much room for the emotional expressions of the newer age of composers. Tchaikovsky's struggle with the traditional form came to a head in his Fourth Symphony. What resulted is a work where the music reigns supreme and Tchaikovsky allows his flow of ideas to dictate the form instead of being restrained by the obligatory repeats, developments and recapitulations. This was truly modern/contemporary music in the late 19th century!

When it was first performed in Moscow the initial reactions were not favorable. The composer Sergei Taneyev wrote to Tchaikovsky that while he admired the first movement, he felt it was too long. He thought it gave the work the feeling of a symphonic poem with three more movements tacked on to justify it as a symphony. The United States premiere in New York City in 1890 was described as "one of the most thoroughly Russian, i.e. semi-barbaric, compositions ever heard in the city." In 1897 a German reviewer wrote, "The composer's twaddle disturbed my mood. The confusion in brass and the abuse of the kettledrums drove me away!"

Thanks to Nadezhda von Meck we have a thorough explanation, from Tchaikovsky, of the Fourth Symphony. In their correspondences he repeatedly referred to the Fourth as "our symphony" and in a response to her request he wrote an extensive explanation of the work, stating that she would find in it "an echo of your most intimate thoughts and emotions."

Tchaikovsky described the introduction, which he called *Fate*, as the "seed of the whole symphony." He wrote that it is that "fateful force, which prevents the impulse towards happiness from achieving its aim... all that remains is to resign yourself and languish fruitlessly..." The "desolate and hopeless feeling becomes stronger and more corrosive. Would it not be better to turn away from reality and give yourself up to daydreams..." Here he sketched the second theme motif introduced by the clarinet and flute. "O joy! at least a sweet and tender daydream has appeared. A gracious bright human form has flitted by and is beckoning somewhere..." He continues to describe the section where the strings are added in a counterpoint to the second theme, "How good! How far away the obsessive first theme sounds now! The daydreams have gradually taken possession of the soul... Everything gloomy and joyless is forgotten. Here is happiness! No! these were daydreams, and *Fate* wakes you from them." He states that the implication of the first movement is that there is no refuge, that you "float on this sea until it engulfs you and plunges you to its depths."

The second movement brings about another expression of depression. "It's the melancholy feeling you get of an evening when, tired after work, you're sitting alone... There are teeming memories... so much has *been and gone*, yet pleasant to recall youth." You don't have the desire to start life again and you resign yourself to nostalgically reflect on your memories. It's sad "yet somehow sweet to immerse yourself in the past."

The use of *pizzicato* strings for an entire movement, as done here in the third movement, is rare and Tchaikovsky makes it sound so natural. He describes it as "capricious arabesques" that you might experience in your imagination after that first glass of wine. Without any real program to the movement, it sets up different images that are "completely inconsequential... and have nothing in common with reality: they are strange, wild, and incoherent."

"If you can't find reasons for joy within yourself, look at others." The fourth movement displays the good time that can be had when people abandon themselves to their feelings of joy. "Barely have you managed to forget yourself and to be carried away by other people's joy when *Fate* appears again and reminds you of its existence." But the loneliness remains: "they have not noticed that you are lonely and sad. What a lovely time

they're having! how lucky they are that their emotions are uncomplicated... don't say that everything in the world is sad. There are simple but potent pleasures. Rejoice... it *is* possible to live."

The difficult and emotional journey Tchaikovsky was on at this time is clearly evident in the description of his symphony and the depths of depression it evokes. But there are, as he describes, simple pleasures and a reason to rejoice.

Tchaikovsky wrote to von Meck during the composition of the symphony that he wanted to dedicate it to her. She preferred that he not use her name, so he wrote "Dedicated to My Best Friend." There is more significance to this dedication: in Russian society artistic patronage meant that the patron and artist were considered equals. A dedication was not only a gesture of gratitude; it was an expression of artistic partnership. Tchaikovsky's dedication was an affirmation of her as an equal partner in the creation of his Fourth Symphony.

Despite the initial negative reception of the Fourth Symphony, it is considered one of Tchaikovsky's greatest works and is one of the most frequently performed symphonies of the late 19th century.

— *Vincent Osborn* © 2017

Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky – Symphony No. 4. This symphony has been performed twelve times previously on the DSSO's Masterworks Series: in 1933, 1938 (with guest conductor Howard Barlow), 1940, 1944, 1950, 1958, 1973, 1982 (with guest conductor Stephen Gunzenhauser), 1992, 1996, 2004, and 2010.

Instrumentation: Two flutes, piccolo, two oboes, two clarinets, two bassoons, four horns, two trumpets, three trombones, tuba, timpani, percussion (bass drum, cymbals, triangle) and strings.