

Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky

“Francesca da Rimini,” Symphonic fantasy after Dante, Opus 32

PYOTR ILYICH TCHAIKOVSKY was born at Kamsko-Votkinsk, Vyatka Province, Russia, on May 7, 1840, and died in St. Petersburg on November 6, 1893. He composed “Francesca da Rimini” between October and November 1876. The first performance was on March 9, 1877, at a concert of the Russian Musical Society in Moscow under the direction of Nikolai Rubinstein.

THE SCORE OF “FRANCESCA DA RIMINI” calls for an orchestra of three flutes (third doubling piccolo), two oboes, English horn, two clarinets, two bassoons, four horns, two trumpets, two cornets, three trombones, tuba, cymbals, bass drum, tam-tam, harp, and strings.

In Canto V of Dante’s *The Inferno*, Dante the Pilgrim continues his journey through the underworld, following his poet guide Virgil into the Second Circle of Hell. Here, the Lustful are punished by being forever whirled about in a dark, stormy wind. This is how Dante describes the horrifying scene (as translated by Ciaran Carson):

...this infernal, never-ending blast
drives every soul before it in its sweep,
tormenting them with every turn and twist,

who, confronted by the ruin, weep,
and gnash their teeth, and moan, and curse and swear,
and blaspheme God, and bawl, and howl, and shriek.

Passing by such legendary lovers as Dido, Cleopatra, Helen of Troy, Achilles, and Tristan, the Pilgrim is drawn to two appealing figures doomed because of their carnal sins to drift alongside each other for eternity in the relentless gale: Paolo and Francesca. Francesca then tells the Pilgrim their sad story as the oddly passive Paolo weeps inconsolably beside her. The beautiful Francesca was married to Paolo’s brother, but drawn to the more handsome Paolo. One day she and Paolo were reading together the French medieval romance of Lancelot and Guinevere, who betrayed their King Arthur (Guinevere’s husband) when they succumbed to an irresistible adulterous mutual passion. Excited by the story, Francesca and Paolo closed the book and yielded to their own strong desires. They kissed and were “seized by love.” When he later became aware of their relationship, Paolo’s brother killed both Paolo and his wife, condemning them (and himself) to everlasting torment in Hell.

Dante based these characters on real historical figures who were also his Italian contemporaries, although he took considerable liberty with the facts in his narrative. (What exactly the facts are is murky in any case.) According to most historical accounts, the father of the beautiful Francesca da Polenta, Guido da Polenta of Ravenna, arranged for his daughter to marry the brave but deformed Gianciotto Malatesta, hoping to solidify a new peace agreement with the Malatesta family. Knowing that she would likely refuse, Francesca’s father had Gianciotto’s handsome brother Paolo make the arrangements with Francesca for the wedding. The two immediately fell in love, and engaged in a secret adulterous relationship after the marriage between Gianciotto and Francesca. When he finally discovered them together, Gianciotto killed them both. In most accounts, Gianciotto intended to kill only Paolo, but Francesca died while attempting to defend her lover.

With its passion, violence, and medieval color, the story of Paolo and Francesca rivals that of Romeo and Juliet in the number of artistic works it has inspired in various media. More than a dozen operas have been written on the subject by composers including Sergei Rachmaninoff (using a libretto written by Tchaikovsky’s brother Modest), Riccardo Zandonai, and Hermann Goetz. Soviet composer Boris Asafiev created a three-act ballet on the story, produced in Moscow in 1947. Three other composers besides Tchaikovsky produced symphonic poems. Particularly

in the nineteenth century, the Paolo and Francesca narrative enjoyed considerable popularity with artists ranging from sculptor Rodin (*The Kiss*) to painters Jean Ingres and Gustave Dore.

Tchaikovsky initially considered composing an opera but eventually decided upon an orchestral piece. From the beginning, he had in mind the lines with which Francesca begins her tale in *The Inferno*: “*Nessun maggior dolore,/Che ricordarsi del tempo felice/Nella miseria...*” (“There is no greater pain,/than to recall past joy/in present hell...”). The sentiments expressed here suited Tchaikovsky’s generally melancholic and nostalgic cast of mind well, particularly at the moment when he began in earnest to transform Dante’s narrative into music in autumn 1876.

At that moment, Tchaikovsky, now thirty-six years old, was severely depressed, suffering from intense feelings of loneliness over his failure to find a life partner or a satisfying family life. In letters to family members, he had recently expressed an intense, almost desperate desire to get married “with whomsoever I may.” At the same time, he was struggling with his homosexuality, vowing to rid himself of his “pernicious passions” so that he could lead a more normal life. It was in the midst of this spiritual and personal crisis (which would result a few months later in a disastrous short-lived marriage and ensuing suicide attempt) that Tchaikovsky set to work on his symphonic fantasia *Francesca da Rimini*. “In no work he had yet written,” observes David Brown in his authoritative biography of the composer, “had his personal condition been of such importance in determining the character of what issued from his creative faculties.”

The other decisive influence on the work’s composition was the music of Richard Wagner. In the summer of 1876, Tchaikovsky attended the first complete performance of the *Ring* cycle at Wagner’s new festival theater at Bayreuth, and wrote a series of articles about the event for a Russian newspaper. In his articles and letters, Tchaikovsky expressed distaste for Wagner’s music (“all in all, it’s murderously boring”), for the celebrity cult surrounding the composer (among those in attendance were Kaiser Wilhelm I and Franz Liszt), and for the bad food and crowded conditions. And yet some months later, after completing *Francesca da Rimini*, he admitted to the composer Sergei Taneyev that hearing the *Nibelungen* had made an enormous impression on him. “Isn’t it odd that I should have submitted to the influence of a work of art that in general is extremely antipathetic to me?”

That Tchaikovsky was particularly inspired by *Francesca da Rimini* seems clear from the incredible speed with which it was composed. It took him only three weeks to finish the score, and three more to orchestrate it. By now he was an accomplished master, having completed three of his six symphonies, the fantasy-overture *Romeo and Juliet*, and the ballet *Swan Lake*. Since both are large programmatic symphonic works portraying stories of tragic romantic love, *Francesca da Rimini* and *Romeo and Juliet* are frequently compared, but they employ different structures and convey different emotional messages. Tchaikovsky called *Romeo and Juliet* a “fantasy-overture,” and it has a tighter formal construction (built around dramatic thematic contrasts). *Francesca da Rimini* is longer (about twenty-four minutes to *Romeo*’s eighteen), more free and pictorial, bearing the descriptive subtitle “*Fantaisie d’après Dante*.”

At the outset, Tchaikovsky paints a bleak and forbidding picture of Dante’s descent into the Second Circle. The Andante lugubre section opens with a downward plunge deep in the contrabasses and bassoons, from D to a pedal point A-flat, forming the interval of the tritone—the epitome of dissonance and discord, known as the “devil in music” for its unsettling sound. Throughout the long introductory section, the cellos and contrabasses continue to descend on long, heavily punctuated downward scales, as the brass choir intones jarring harmonies that Tchaikovsky admitted were probably influenced by the Wagner operas he had heard in Bayreuth. In the succeeding Moderato the meter shifts to 12/8 and we begin to sense the movement of wind, at first softly, then growing louder and more ferocious into full-fledged storm music of tremendous power. Here and in the following Allegro vivo (in 6/8), in E minor, the wind several times dies down, only to return with even greater intensity, reinforced by cymbals, bass drum, and timpani in a breathless whirlwind of sound.

Tchaikovsky takes his time in conjuring the horrific maelstrom in which Francesca and Paolo are fated to dwell. Only about one-third into the piece does he finally introduce his title character. After a clarinet cadenza expressing

infinite sorrow, one of the composer's most fully realized love themes (moving from A minor to E major) emerges in the clarinet, against a strummed pizzicato accompaniment. Some critics have found this embodiment of the innocent initial attraction between the lovers too "Russian" in character, but none could deny its lyrical purity and originality. Later (in 12/8, *L'istesso tempo*) a second more passionate and sensual theme continues the tale, in glowing E-flat major, with characteristically Tchaikovskian swelling and unison in the string parts. With great ingenuity, this section is linked to a return of the 6/8 storm music and the home key of E minor. The surging winds obliterate the tender moments of recalled love in one of Tchaikovsky's loudest, darkest, and most insistent finales.

Here, the music breathes with the words Dante sees on the gateway to Hell: "Abandon all hope, ye who enter here."

Harlow Robinson