

Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky

Symphony No. 6 in B minor, Opus 74, "Pathétique"

PYOTR ILYICH TCHAIKOVSKY was born at Votkinsk, Vyatka Province, on May 7, 1840, and died in St. Petersburg on November 6, 1893. He composed the Sixth Symphony between February 16 and August 31, 1893. The first performance took place in the Hall of Nobles, St. Petersburg, on October 28 that year with Tchaikovsky conducting, nine days before his death. The second performance, with Eduard Nápravník conducting, took place twenty days later in the same hall, as part of a concert given in memory of the composer.

THE SYMPHONY IS SCORED for three flutes (third doubling piccolo), two oboes, two clarinets, two bassoons, four horns, two trumpets, three trombones, tuba, timpani, cymbals, bass drum, tam-tam, and strings.

During Tchaikovsky's last years, his reputation grew enormously outside of Russia, but he was left prey to deepening inner gloom, since his countrymen rarely recognized his genius. He had, moreover, been shattered by the sudden breaking-off of the strange but profoundly moving epistolary relationship that he had carried on for fourteen years with Nadezhda von Meck, whose financial assistance and understanding had sustained him through difficult times. Though they never met face to face, their relationship was one of the strongest, in its emotional depth, that either of them was ever to experience. She, for unknown reasons, decided to end the correspondence decisively in October 1890; Tchaikovsky never fully recovered from the blow. Another reason for his depression was an old but continuing concern—the constant fear that his homosexuality might become known to the public at large or to the authorities (which would lead to terrible consequences, since homosexuality was regarded as a crime that might involve serious legal ramifications, including banishment and the loss of his civil rights).

Tchaikovsky was also concerned that he was written out. In 1892 he began a symphony and had even partly orchestrated it when he decided to discard it entirely. (Completed by a Russian musicologist some fifty years ago, it was then performed as Tchaikovsky's "Seventh Symphony"; the composer's self-critical view was right.) But a trip to western Europe in December brought a warm reunion: he visited his old governess, whom he had not seen for over forty years. The two days he spent with her, reading over many letters from his mother and his brothers and sisters, not to mention some of his earliest musical and literary work, carried him off into a deep nostalgia. As the composer wrote to his brother Nikolai, "There were moments when I returned into the past so vividly that it became weird, and at the same time sweet, and we both had to keep back our tears."

The retrospective mood thus engendered may have remained even though he returned to Russia at low ebb: "It seems to me that my role is finished for good." Yet the recent opportunity to recall his childhood, when combined with his fundamentally pessimistic outlook, may well have led to the program for the work that suggested itself to him and captured his attention on the way home. Within two weeks of writing the foregoing words, Tchaikovsky was hard at work on what was to become his masterpiece. Home again, he wrote in mid-February to a nephew that he was in an excellent state of mind and hard at work on a new symphony with a program—"but a program that will be a riddle for everyone. Let them try and solve it." He left only hints: "The program of this symphony is completely saturated with myself and quite often during my journey I cried profusely." The work, he said, was going exceedingly well. On March 24 he completed the sketch of the second movement—evidently the last to be outlined in detail—and noted his satisfaction at the bottom of the page: "O Lord, I thank Thee! Today, March 24th, completed preliminary sketch well!!!"

The orchestration was interrupted until July because he made a trip to Cambridge to receive an honorary doctorate (see photo on page 43), an honor that he shared with Saint-Saëns, Boito, Bruch, and Grieg (who was ill and unable to be present). He was presented for the degree with a citation in Latin that appropriately singled out the "*ardor fervidus*" and the "*languor subtristis*" of his music. When he returned home he found that the orchestration would be more difficult than he expected: "Twenty years ago I used to go full speed ahead and it came out very well. Now I have become cowardly and unsure of myself. For instance, today I sat the whole day over two pages—nothing went as I wanted it to." In another letter he noted, "It will be...no surprise if this symphony is abused and unappreciated—that has happened before. But I definitely find it my very best, and in particular the most sincere of all my compositions. I love it as I have never loved any of my musical children."

Though Tchaikovsky was eager to begin an opera at once, the Sixth Symphony was to be the last work he would complete. The premiere on October 28 went off well despite the orchestra's coolness toward the piece, but the audience was puzzled by the whole—not least by its somber ending. Rimsky-Korsakov confronted Tchaikovsky at

intermission and asked whether there was not a program to that expressive music; the composer admitted that there was, indeed, a program, but he refused to give any details. Five days later Tchaikovsky failed to appear for breakfast; he complained of indigestion during the night, but refused to see a doctor. His situation worsened, and in the evening his brother Modest sent for medical help anyway. For several days Tchaikovsky lingered on, generally in severe pain. He died at three o'clock in the morning on November 6.

Though it is generally believed that Tchaikovsky's death was the result of cholera brought on by his drinking a glass of unboiled water during an epidemic, the extraordinarily expressive richness of the Sixth Symphony, and particularly that of its finale, has inspired a great deal of speculation regarding the composer's demise. It has even been suggested—in accordance with a theory advocated by the Russian musicologist Aleksandra Orlova and then taken up by the English Tchaikovsky scholar David Brown in *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians* (1980)—that Tchaikovsky poisoned himself fearing denunciation to the Tsar as a homosexual by a duke with whose nephew he had struck up a friendship. Other writers have asserted that the music was composed because of the composer's premonitions of impending death. For now, as Roland John Wiley writes in the revised *New Grove* (2001): "The polemics over his death have reached an impasse....We do not know how Tchaikovsky died."

As to the composer's alleged "premonitions of impending death," one finds from a perusal of his letters that, until the last few days, he was clearly in better spirits than he had enjoyed for years, confident and looking forward to future compositions. The expressive qualities of the Sixth Symphony follow from his two previous symphonies, which are also concerned in various ways with Fate. The Fourth and Fifth symphonies had offered two views of man's response to Fate—on the one hand finding solace in the life of the peasants, on the other struggling to conquest, though through a somewhat unconvincing victory. In the Sixth Symphony, Fate leads only to despair.

Tchaikovsky never did reveal a formal program to the symphony, though a note found among his papers is probably an early draft for one:

The ultimate essence of the plan of the symphony is LIFE. First part—all impulsive passion, confidence, thirst for activity. Must be short. (Finale DEATH—result of collapse.) Second part love; third disappointments; fourth ends dying away (also short).

In the end, all of this (and any possible elaborations of it) remained the composer's secret. The title that it now bears came only the day after the first performance, when the composer, having rejected "A Program Symphony" (since he had no intention of revealing the program) and Modest's suggestion of "Tragic," was taken with his brother's alternative suggestion, "Pathetic." Modest recalled his brother's reaction: "'Excellent, Modya, bravo, *Pathetic!*' and before my eyes he wrote on the score the title by which it has since been known." The title gives a misimpression in English, where "pathetic" has become a debased slang word, almost totally losing its original sense of "passionate" or "emotional," with a hint of its original Greek sense of "suffering." In French it still retains its significance. And the symphony is, without a doubt, the most successful evocation of Tchaikovsky's emotional suffering, sublimated into music of great power.

The slow introduction begins in the "wrong" key but works its way around to B minor and the beginning of the *Allegro non troppo*. The introduction proves to foreshadow the main thematic material, which is a variant of the opening figure in the bassoon over the dark whispering of the double basses. The great climax to which this builds is a splendid preparation for one of Tchaikovsky's greatest tunes, a falling and soaring melody that is worked to a rich climax and then dies away with a lingering afterthought in the clarinet. An unexpected orchestral crash begins the tense development section, which builds a wonderful sense of energy as the opening thematic material returns in a distant key and only gradually works round to the tonic. The romantic melody, now in the tonic B major, is especially passionate.

The second movement is quite simply a scherzo and Trio, but it has a couple of special wrinkles of its own. Tchaikovsky was one of the great composers of the orchestral waltz (think of the third movement of the Fifth Symphony); here he chose to write a waltz that happens to be in 5/4 time! According to the conservative Viennese critic Eduard Hanslick: "This disagreeable meter upsets both listener and player." But the odd rhythmic twist is more than compensated for by the extraordinary grace of the music.

The third movement is a brilliant march, beginning with rushing busy triplets that alternate with a crisp march melody that bursts out into a climactic full orchestral version, a momentary triumph. That triumph comes to a sudden end with the beginning of the final movement, which bears the unprecedented marking "*Adagio lamentoso*."

The first theme is divided between the two violin parts in such a way that neither first nor second violin part alone makes sense, but when played together they result in a simple, expressive, descending melody. The second theme, a more flowing Andante, builds to a great orchestral climax exceeded only by the climax of the opening material that follows. This dies away and a single stroke of the tam-tam, followed by a soft and sustained dark passage for trombones and tuba, brings in the “dying fall” of the ending, the second theme descending into the lowest depths of cellos and basses.

Ultimately, of course, Tchaikovsky’s farewell vision is a somber one, congruent with his own pessimistic view of life. But it is worth remembering—especially given all the stories that whirl around the composer—that his art, and especially the *Pathétique* Symphony, was a means of self-transcendence, a way of overcoming the anguish and torment of his life. It has sometimes been assumed in the past that Tchaikovsky chose to revel in his misery; but in the Sixth Symphony, at least, he confronted it, recreated it in sound, and put it firmly behind him.

Steven Ledbetter