PETER TCHAIKOVSKY

SYMPHONY NO. 4
Movement no. 2: Andantino in modo di canzona

Tchaikovsky (1840-1893) was a very famous Russian composer who lived in the second half of the nineteenth century. He is most famous today for the many beautiful pieces he composed for orchestra, and even more so for his ballets, which are still performed all over the world: almost everyone has seen or heard of Sleeping Beauty, Swan Lake, and especially The Nutcracker! If he had only composed those three ballets Tchaikovsky would still be very famous, but he also composed a number of very popular symphonies; although he left six in total, the fourth, fifth and sixth symphonies (his sixth symphony is sometimes called “Pathétique”, although the others don’t have nicknames) have become the most well-known by far.

Tchaikovsky composed his fourth symphony at a very strange time in his life. He began it shortly before marrying one of his former students, a marriage which went terribly awry and only lasted a few months; Tchaikovsky then finished the symphony after the marriage had completely fallen apart. But at around the same time, a person of great importance entered his life: this was Nadezhda von Meck, a wealthy and influential Russian widow who greatly admired Tchaikovsky’s music. She offered to send him a huge yearly allowance – enough for him to give up teaching and focus completely on composing – on the curious condition that they never, ever meet face-to-face. Instead, they wrote literally thousands of letters to each other over many years.

As another condition for her patronage, von Meck also often asked that Tchaikovsky explain the story behind the music he was composing. Perhaps in response to the bewildering circumstances surrounding the fourth symphony, he told her that it was about Fate: the inability to predict the paths our lives would lead, whether for better or for worse, and how what was to become of us was predestined, one way or another, by fate. Does the second movement sound like it’s about fate to you?