



Pyotr TCHAIKOVSKY

Symphony No. 4

Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky (7 May 1840 – 6 November 1893), was a Russian composer of the romantic period, whose works are among the most popular music in the classical repertoire. He was the first Russian composer whose music made a lasting impression internationally, bolstered by his appearances as a guest conductor in Europe and the United States. He was honored in 1884 by Emperor Alexander III, and awarded a lifetime pension.

Although musically precocious, Tchaikovsky was educated for a career as a civil servant. There was scant opportunity for a musical career in Russia at that time and no system of public music education. When an opportunity for such an education arose, he entered the nascent Saint Petersburg Conservatory, from which he graduated in 1865. The formal Western-oriented teaching he received there set him apart from composers of the contemporary nationalist movement embodied by the Russian composers of The Five, with whom his professional relationship was mixed.

Despite his many popular successes, Tchaikovsky's life was punctuated by personal crises and depression. Contributory factors included his early separation from his mother for boarding school followed by his mother's early death, the death of his close friend and colleague Nikolai Rubinstein, and the collapse of the one enduring relationship of his adult life, which was his 13-year association with the wealthy widow Nadezhda von Meck who was his patron even though they never actually met each other. His homosexuality, which he kept private, has traditionally also been considered a major factor, though some musicologists now downplay its importance. Tchaikovsky's sudden death at the age of 53 is generally ascribed to cholera; there is an ongoing debate as to whether cholera was indeed the cause of death, and whether his death was accidental or self-inflicted.

The Fourth Symphony is where Tchaikovsky's struggles with Western sonata form came to a head. In some ways he was not alone. The Romantics in general were never natural symphonists because music was to them primarily evocative and biographical. In his first three symphonies he had striven to stay within strict Western form. The turbulent changes in his personal life, including his marital crisis, now led him to write music so strongly personal and expressive that structural matters could not stay as they had been. Beginning with the Fourth Symphony, the symphony served as a human document—dramatic, autobiographical, concerned not with everyday things but with things psychological. This was because Tchaikovsky's creative impulses had become unprecedentedly personal, urgent, capable of enormous expressive forcefulness.

The combination of emotional urgency and supercharged melody precluded musical development in part because the melody's emotional content was already in full bloom, with all the emotional and musical interest it could bear. Since musical development is a creative unfolding of the latent possibilities—rhythmic, melodic and harmonic—of contrasting themes, there was literally nothing to develop further. The only course of action left was to substitute repetition for true development—in other words, to say again in a different way what has already been said and to trust the beauty and significance of what are fundamentally variations to supply the place of a development section as demanded by sonata form.

Like "The Five," Tchaikovsky found that with a loose symphonic-poem type of structure pioneered by Franz Liszt, he could combine large-scale orchestral writing with emotions and instrumental colors toward which he gravitated naturally. The result was a symphonic hybrid, a cross between the primarily architectural form of the symphony and the primarily "literary" or "poetic" form of the symphonic poem. Melody, tonality, rhythm and orchestral timbres work together to form an indivisible whole. In the first movement of the Fourth Symphony, he introduces a highly rhythmic theme in the brass. The structure of this movement is made up of a complete series of rotating thirds, from F to A-flat, B D and back to F, then a recapitulation to a third below the tonic. The brass theme delineates each stage of the structure. To heighten drama, he focuses mainly on rhythm, texture and orchestral color. The resulting tension in the first movement does not come from a Germanic transformation of themes. It results from rhythmic opposition between the polonaise rhythm of the aggressive "Fate" motif in the brass and the gentler waltz of the first theme, carried alternately by woodwinds and strings. The finale of this symphony is rounds off the symphonic cycle into a cohesive whole as here, Tchaikovsky repeats the "Fate" motif which opened the work.