



TCHAIKOVSKY

Symphony No. 6 in B minor, Op. 74 *“Pathétique”*

Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky (May 7, 1840 to November 6, 1893) was a Russian composer of the Romantic era. His wide-ranging output includes symphonies, operas, ballet, chamber music and songs. From these genres come some of the most popular concert and theatrical music in the repertoire, including the ballets *Swan Lake*, *The Sleeping Beauty* and *The Nutcracker*, the *1812 Overture*, his first Piano Concerto and last three symphonies. Born into a middle-class family, Tchaikovsky was educated as a civil servant. Yet against the wishes of his family he enrolled in the Saint Petersburg Conservatory to pursue a musical career. This step also set him apart from many of his contemporaries (such as Balakirev and the Five), who spurned Western-oriented formal training in favour of nationalistic (Russian) inspirations. Tchaikovsky's personal life was often marred by emotional turmoil. He was known for sensitivity even as a child, and he carried this emotional instability well into his adult life. Contributing factors to bouts of depression include the abrupt end of a 13-year relationship with his patron, a wealthy widow named Nadezhda von Meck. Despite his private turmoil his reputation grew and he enjoyed many popular successes. He was honoured by the Tsar, awarded a lifetime pension and lauded in concert halls around the world. His sudden death at age 53 is generally attributed to cholera, but some suspect suicide. Tchaikovsky's music was for a time dismissed by American music critics as being vulgar and lacking in elevated thought. By the end of the 20th century and into the 21st, however, Tchaikovsky's status as a significant composer is regarded as secure.

Premiered a mere nine days before Tchaikovsky's death, The **Symphony No. 6 in B minor, Op. 74, “Pathétique”** is his final symphony, written February and the end of August 1893. Although most contemporary scholars dismiss the idea that the symphony was a suicide letter, Richard Taruskin noted that “[they] were much stimulated by the Sixth Symphony, which was first performed under the composer's baton only nine days before his demise, with its lugubrious finale (ending *morendo*, 'dying away'), its brief but conspicuous allusion to the Orthodox requiem liturgy in the first movement and above all its easily misread subtitle.... When the symphony was done again a couple of weeks later, in memoriam and with subtitle in place, everyone listened hard for portents, and that is how the symphony became a transparent suicide note.” In fact, Pathétique meant for Tchaikovsky “passionate” or “emotional,” a word reflective of a touch of concurrent suffering. Tchaikovsky considered calling it Программная (*Programmnaya* or “Programme Symphony”) but realised that would encourage curiosity about the programme, which he did not want to reveal. Tchaikovsky specialist David Brown suggested that the symphony deals with the power of Fate in life and death: “the ultimate essence ... of the symphony is Life. First part – all impulse, passion, confidence, thirst for activity. Must be short (the finale death – result of collapse). Second part love: third disappointments; fourth ends dying away (also short).”