



Pyotr Ilyich TCHAIKOVSKY

Manfred Symphony

Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky (7 May 1840 – 6 November 1893) was a Russian composer. He had begun piano lessons at the age of 5, and before turning 8, his sight-reading eclipsed that of his teacher. Despite his musical precociousness, Tchaikovsky's parents did not believe that a career as a musician was feasible in Russia, and sent the 10-year-old Tchaikovsky to boarding school to be educated for a career in the government. This early separation from his mother — who would die from cholera when Tchaikovsky was 14 — would create a lifelong trauma. Despite this turmoil, Tchaikovsky graduated at 19 and became a senior assistant at the Ministry of Justice in St. Petersburg the same year. Concurrently, Anton Rubinstein had founded the Russian Musical Society (Russia's first music school open to the public) in St. Petersburg, and Tchaikovsky attended classes at the school (which became the St. Petersburg Conservatory in 1862). As a prized student, Tchaikovsky was offered a job as a professor by Anton Rubinstein's brother, Nikolai, at what would soon become the Moscow Conservatory. In the following years, as his career grew, the public became increasingly interested in Tchaikovsky's private life. Contending with his homosexuality — banned in Russia apart from the upper classes at the time — Tchaikovsky married a previous student of his, but ran away from her within 3 months. He had also formed a relationship with Nadezhda von Meck in 1878, — the widow of a railway magnate who greatly admired Tchaikovsky's work — who became his patroness, enabling him to devote all of his time to composition. Over the next years, Tchaikovsky would output some of his most successful compositions, and his international reputation grew. He had overcome his fear of conducting, and — combined with the cosmopolitanism of his music, a trait which differentiated him from his Russian contemporaries — was invited to conduct at the inaugural concert at Carnegie Hall in New York City. In his later years, Tchaikovsky did not seem to have any intimate relationships, but he dedicated pieces and wrote to his nephew, who was also homosexual. Suddenly, in 1893, Tchaikovsky contracted cholera during an epidemic in St. Petersburg, but many speculate that his death was a suicide, due to his lifelong depression.

The *Manfred Symphony in B minor, Op. 58* (1885) is a programmatic work (a piece which tells a story through its music) based on Lord Byron's poem of the same name (written in 1817). Written between his Fourth and Fifth symphonies, Tchaikovsky wrote the piece for Mily Balakirev (leader of The Russian Five), who provided a program written by critic Vladimir Stasov. Stasov had sent the program to Balakirev in 1868 with hopes that the nationalist composer would write a piece to it. Balakirev did not feel capable of accomplishing the task, and kept the program until reestablishing contact with Tchaikovsky in the early 1880s. The original dramatic poem — which depicts a Faustian character who summons spirits, hoping they can grant him forgetfulness after the death of his most beloved — never received as much attention as the musical treatment by Tchaikovsky.

In the first movement (*Lento lugubre*), Manfred wanders in the Alps. Weary of the fatal question of existence, tormented by hopeless longings and the memory of past crimes, he suffers cruel spiritual pangs. He has plunged into occult sciences and commands the mighty powers of darkness, but neither they nor anything in this world can give him the forgetfulness to which alone he vainly aspires. The memory of the lost Astarte, once passionately loved, gnaws his heart and there is neither limit nor end to Manfred's despair.

In the second movement (*Vivace con spirito*), an Alpine fairy appears before Manfred in the rainbow from the spray of a waterfall.

The third movement (*Andante con moto*), as Stasov imagined, contrasts Manfred with simple Alpine hunters. He enters in the middle of this “quiet, idyllic adagio,” as Stasov described the movement.

The fourth movement (*Allegro con fuoco*) is set in an infernal orgy in the underground palace of the demon. Manfred appears and raises the spirit of Astarte, who foretells the end of his earthly torments. Manfred dies, and does find peace (this being Tchaikovsky's hopeful interpretation of Byron's far less rosy text), first in a blaze of C-major glory, then in quiet intimations of paradise over a repeated bass figure.