



# Pyotr Ilyich TCHAIKOVSKY

## *Concerto for Piano and Orchestra No. 2*

**Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky** (7 May 1840 – 6 November 1893) was a Russian composer of the Romantic period. He was the first Russian composer whose music would make a lasting impression internationally. He wrote some of the most popular concert and theatrical music in the current classical repertoire, including the ballets *Swan Lake* and *The Nutcracker*, the 1812 Overture, his First Piano Concerto, several symphonies, and the opera *Eugene Onegin*. Although musically precocious, Tchaikovsky was educated for a career as a civil servant. There was scant opportunity for a musical career in Russia at the 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 that 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. Tchaikovsky's training set him on a path to reconcile what he had learned with the native musical practices to which he had been exposed from childhood. From that reconciliation, he forged a personal but unmistakably Russian style. The principles that governed melody, harmony and other fundamentals of Russian music ran completely counter to those that governed Western European music, which seemed to defeat the potential for using Russian music in large-scale Western composition or for forming a composite style, and it caused personal antipathies that dented Tchaikovsky's self-confidence. Russian culture exhibited a split personality, with its native and adopted elements having drifted apart increasingly since the time of Peter the Great. That resulted in uncertainty among the intelligentsia about the country's national identity, an ambiguity mirrored in Tchaikovsky's career. 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, his 13-year association with the wealthy widow Nadezhda von Meck, who was his patron even though they never met. 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, but there is an ongoing debate as to whether cholera was indeed the cause of his death. While his music has remained popular among audiences, critical opinions were initially mixed. Some Russians did not feel it was sufficiently representative of native musical values and expressed suspicion that Europeans accepted the music for its Western elements. In an apparent reinforcement of the latter claim, some Europeans lauded Tchaikovsky for offering music more substantive than base exoticism and said he transcended stereotypes of Russian classical music. Others dismissed Tchaikovsky's music as "lacking in elevated thought" and derided its formal workings as deficient because they did not stringently follow Western principles.

Tchaikovsky's **Piano Concerto No. 2** in G major, Op. 44, was written in 1879–1880 and dedicated to Nikolai Rubinstein, who had insisted he be allowed to perform it at the premiere as a way of making up for his harsh criticism of Tchaikovsky's First Piano Concerto. But Rubinstein was destined never to play it, as he died in March 1881, and the work has never attained much popularity. The premiere performance took place in New York City, on 12 November 1881. The soloist was Madeline Schiller, and Theodore Thomas conducted the New York Philharmonic orchestra. The first Russian performance was in Moscow in May 1882, conducted by Anton Rubinstein with Tchaikovsky's pupil, Sergei Taneyev, at the piano. The piano concerto consists of three movements: 1. *Allegro brillante e molto vivace*, 2. *Andante non troppo* (in D major), and 3. *Allegro con fuoco*. The second movement contains prominent solos for the violin and cello, making the work in effect a concerto for piano trio and orchestra briefly, though a once-popular edition by Alexander Siloti removed large sections of the work, including those solos. Siloti initially proposed a number of changes to the score, but Tchaikovsky resisted these ideas. As time progressed, however, he did agree to certain changes. However, the version that Siloti published in 1897, four years after Tchaikovsky's death, included cuts and transpositions with which Tchaikovsky had strongly disagreed. Nevertheless, the Siloti version became the standard version for many years. Also noteworthy is the degree of segregation of orchestra and soloist, especially in the opening movement. Tchaikovsky had told his close friend Hermann Laroche many years earlier that he would never write a piano concerto because he could not tolerate the sound of piano and orchestra playing together. Though he handled this well enough in the First Piano Concerto, he would increasingly intersperse cadenza-like passages for the soloist in the movements of his later works for piano and orchestra. For listeners trying to orient themselves through this concerto, those passages, with their abrupt switch between piano and supporting instruments, make it easier.