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TSCHAIKOWSKY

and his Orchestral Music



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Title: Tschaikowsky and his orchestral music

Author: Louis Biancolli

Release date: October 16, 2015 [eBook #50230]

Most recently updated: October 22, 2024

Language: English

Credits: Produced by Stephen Hutcheson, Kris de Bruijn, Dave Morgan and the Online Distributed Proofreading Team at <http://www.pgdp.net>

*** START OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK TSCHAIKOWSKY AND HIS ORCHESTRAL MUSIC ***



Peter Ilyitch Tschaikowsky

A drawing of the composer late in life.

Tschaikowsky

AND HIS ORCHESTRAL MUSIC

By LOUIS BIANCOLLI



NEW YORK

Grosset & Dunlap

PUBLISHERS

Copyright 1944, 1950

The Philharmonic-Symphony Society of New York

Printed in the United States of America

Foreword

Included in this little book are analyses and backgrounds of most of Tschaikowsky's standard concert music. A short sketch of Tschaikowsky's life precedes the section devoted to the orchestral music. Yet, the personal outlook and moods of Russia's great composer are so inextricably bound up with his music, that actually the whole booklet is an account of his strangely tormented life. In the story of Tschaikowsky, life and art weave into one closely knit fabric. It is hoped that this simple narrative will aid music lovers to glimpse the great pathos and struggle behind the music of this sad and lonely man.

Tschaikowsky

AND HIS ORCHESTRAL MUSIC

Few great names in music spell as much magic to the average concert-goer as that of Peter Ilyitch Tschaikowsky. In almost every musical form will be found a work of his ranking high in popularity. And quite deservedly so. Tschaikowsky's music brims with a warm humanity and stirring drama. The themes and feelings are easy to grasp. The personal, intimate note is so strong in this music that we find it natural, while listening to the *Pathetic* symphony or the *Nutcracker* ballet suite, for example, to share Tschaikowsky's joys and sorrows. His music seems to take us into his confidence and show us the secret places of his heart. Although Tschaikowsky's range of moods is wide—from the whimsical play of light fantasy to stormy outcries of anguish—essentially he was a melancholy man, in his music as in his life. Perhaps it is the genuineness of his music in conveying great pathos and suffering that has drawn millions to his symphonies and concertos. A frank sincerity and warmheartedness well from his music. The best of his melodies linger hauntingly in the mind and heart. So long as sincere feeling expressed in sincere artistic form can move the hearts of men, Tschaikowsky's music will continue to hold a high place in the concert hall and opera house.

Only Beethoven and Mozart can rival Tschaikowsky in the number of compositions in various musical forms that stand out as repertory favorites. Tschaikowsky's violin concerto is as much a "request" item as Beethoven's. The *Pathetic* symphony ranks with the three or four enduring favorites of the repertory. Tschaikowsky's *Nutcracker* ballet is probably the most popular suite of its kind in music. The opera, *Eugene Onegin*, a masterpiece worthy to stand beside some of the best Italian and German operas, is widely loved even outside Russia. Tschaikowsky's Piano Concerto, or, at any rate, the big opening theme, is doubtless known to more people than all other piano concertos put together. The overture-fantasies, *Romeo and Juliet* and *Francesca da Rimini*, rank with the most popular in that form, and the *Overture 1812* is an international hit with music-lovers of all ages and stages. Tschaikowsky's song, *None But the Lonely Heart*, is better known to many music-lovers than most of the songs of Brahms and Schubert, and the great String Quartet contains a melody familiar to every follower of popular song trends. For, of all the classical composers, Tschaikowsky has been a veritable gold-mine as a lucrative source of themes for popular arrangement.

Yet, this sad and sensitive musical genius who knew so well how to reach the human soul surprisingly began his career as a clerk in the St. Petersburg Ministry of Justice. Like other great Russian composers, Tschaikowsky arrived at music by a circuitous route, almost by accident. Moussorgsky, one recalls, was long an officer in the Czar's Army before he switched to music. And Borodin always regarded music as a secondary pursuit to his medical practice and his laboratory experiments in chemistry. Tschaikowsky was first a lawyer. But soon he found court action and the preparation of briefs tiresome and unsavory toil, so at twenty-one he returned to his first love, which was music.

Born on May 7, 1840, Tschaikowsky had begun to study piano at the age of seven. When he was ten, his father, a director of a foundry at Votinsk with next to no interest in music, took the family to St. Petersburg. There young Peter continued his musical studies, never, though, with any

thought of preparing for a career in music. Yet, later, even while studying law, he went on playing the piano and taking part in the performances of a choral society. Although he amused friends by improvising on the piano, few detected any signs of creative genius. At twenty-one Tschaikowsky made his crucial break. He abandoned law, began earnestly to master musical theory, and resolved to risk poverty and starvation by devoting himself to music professionally. Today we can only applaud his decision. The repertory would be the poorer without his music. Besides, it is not likely that the law lost a great practitioner when Tschaikowsky bade it farewell.

His first important step was to enroll in the Russian Musical Society, later to become the St. Petersburg Conservatory. There Anton Rubinstein, the renowned pianist and composer, then teaching composition and orchestration, exerted a lasting influence on him. At that time Anton's brother Nicholas was founding the Moscow Conservatory. Impressed by Tschaikowsky's brilliant showing at the St. Petersburg school, he engaged him as instructor in harmony for the new Moscow organization. Tschaikowsky held the post for eleven years. The pay was scant, but there were weightier compensations. Nicholas Rubinstein gave the young man a room in his Moscow house, encouraged him to compose, introduced him around, and gave him sound advice on sundry matters. Best of all, he produced many of Tschaikowsky's early compositions. Tschaikowsky, loyal and devoted in all his ties, never forgot his friend. After Rubinstein's death, he dedicated his Trio, *In Memory of a Great Artist*, to the great man who had given him his real start in music and a creative life.

During his second year in the Moscow Conservatory Tschaikowsky fell madly in love with the French soprano Désirée Artôt, then touring Russia. While the indecisive Russian wasted time weighing the advantages and disadvantages of marriage, a Spanish baritone named Padilla came along, made violent love to Mlle. Artôt, and hurried her off to the altar before she could catch her breath and notify her Russian suitor. We nevertheless owe the fickle French lady a debt of gratitude. Without the emotional disturbance Tschaikowsky might not have been moved to write the *Romeo and Juliet* overture-fantasy. His first serious rebuff in love had at any rate paid dividends in art.

From then on Tschaikowsky wrote at a feverish pace. Whenever his duties at the Conservatory could spare him, he retired to his study and wrote symphonies, overtures, operas, chamber music, songs, and religious choruses. Sometimes a gnawing doubt in his own talents assailed him. To his friends he wrote voluminous letters complaining of the strong sense of inferiority bedeviling his work. There were attacks of bleak gloom and diffidence lasting weeks. Trips to the country or to Italy and Switzerland were often needed to restore his damaged nervous system and jarred self-confidence to normalcy. Unfavorable reviews stung him like wasps. And while Moscow often evidenced great enthusiasm for his music, St. Petersburg was harder to please. The press there was often virulent with abuse.

Then Tschaikowsky pinned great hopes on his operas *Eugene Onegin* and *Pique Dame* ("The Queen of Spades"). Both proved fiascos at their premières, though the public and press later revised their opinions drastically. Moreover, reports reached him of the cold reception accorded his *Romeo and Juliet* in Paris and the catcalls greeting his music in Vienna. And there was a music critic named Eduard Hanslick in Vienna who kept Tschaikowsky awake nights wondering what new critical blast was awaiting his latest Viennese première.

Ironically, America and England were the only two countries instantly attracted to Tschaikowsky's music. There his prestige rose with each new symphony or overture. Cambridge University conferred an honorary doctor's degree on him in 1893. Europe was soon to be won over, however. Despite an often hostile press, the music publics of France, Germany, and Austria began clamoring for more and more of his music, and conductors were forced to acquiesce. But to the end he remained a sorrowing and morose man, hypersensitive, even morbidly so, but almost always the soul of kindness and punctilio. When, on the invitation of Walter Damrosch, Tschaikowsky came to America in 1891, he was widely acclaimed by public and press. While here he gave six concerts in all, four in New York, one in Baltimore and one in Philadelphia. In New York he was guest of honor on the programs of the New York Symphony Society celebrating the opening of the Music Hall, now Carnegie Hall. The festival lasted from May 5 to May 9, and Tschaikowsky was widely feted socially and professionally. He conducted several of his own works in the hall constructed largely from funds provided by the steel magnate, Andrew Carnegie.

The year 1877 is an important one in the chronicle of Tschaikowsky's life. He made his one disastrous experiment in marriage with a romantic-minded young conservatory student named Antonina Miliukov. The girl had aroused his pity and alarm by her passionate avowals of love and equally passionate threats of suicide. The story is discussed below in my account of the Fourth Symphony, which grew partly out of that distressing episode. Suffice it here to note that the experience was so shattering to Tschaikowsky that he attempted to end his life by standing up to his neck at night in the freezing waters of the Neva River. Antonina eventually died in an insane asylum. Tschaikowsky formed another alliance that year, one far more profitable and far less nerve-racking than his short tie with Mlle. Miliukov. This was his famous friendship with Nadezhda von Meck, a wealthy and cultivated widow. Out of profound admiration for his music and a probable romantic hope to become Mrs. Tschaikowsky, Mme. von Meck settled an annuity amounting to \$3,000 on the destitute and ailing composer. The gift continued for thirteen years. Many letters about life, music, and people were exchanged between Tschaikowsky and his Lady Bountiful. The two never met, however. Tschaikowsky's Fourth Symphony is dedicated to this remarkable woman, who was the most famous Fairy Godmother in music.

Although Tschaikowsky himself thought of the *Pathetic* symphony as his crowning masterpiece, the première on October 28, 1893, in St. Petersburg proved a disappointment. Tschaikowsky took it bitterly. Two weeks later, however, the tables were turned. Everybody acclaimed it warmly. But Tschaikowsky was not there to bow his acknowledgment. He had fallen victim to the cholera epidemic then raging in St. Petersburg. Though warned by the authorities, Tschaikowsky drank some unboiled water on November 2. Four days later he was dead. No symphony was more appropriately named than this melancholy masterpiece, the *Pathetic* symphony, the brooding phrases of which sound truly like the "swan song" of a tired and abysmally disillusioned man of genius.

Marches, Overtures, Fantasias, Etc.

Marche Slave, Opus 31

The *Marche Slave* stands foremost among Tschaikowsky's marches, of which he wrote numerous, including several incorporated in his operas and suites. Most of them were composed for special purposes or occasions. There is the *Marche Solennelle*, written "for the Law Students," which figured on the housewarming program at the opening of Carnegie Hall in May, 1891, besides a *Marche Militaire*, which he wrote for the band of the Czar's 98th Infantry Regiment. In 1883 the city of Moscow requisitioned a *Coronation March* from him. Earlier, Tschaikowsky had written a march in honor of the famous General Skobelev. But he held it in such low esteem that he allowed it to circulate as the work of a non-existent composer named Sinopov.



The composer at the age of twenty-three, during his early years at the Moscow Conservatory.



Désirée Artôt, the French soprano who, in jilting Tschaikowsky, helped to inspire his Romeo and Juliet overture-fantasy.

The *Marche Slave* was written in 1876 for a benefit concert to raise funds for soldiers wounded in the Turko-Serbian war, which presently merged into a greater war between Turkey and Russia. It is based largely on the old Russian anthem, "God Save the Emperor," and some South Slavonic and Serbian tunes. The main theme has been traced to the Serbian folk song, *Sunce varko ne fijas jednako* ("Come, my dearest, why so sad this morning?"). Divided into three sections, the march features fragments of the old Czarist hymn in the middle portion. How the hymn itself came to be written is told by its author, Alexis Feodorovich Lvov:

"In 1833, I accompanied the Emperor Nicholas during his travels in Prussia and Austria. When we had returned to Russia I was informed by Count von Benkendorf that the sovereign regretted that we Russians had no national anthem of our own, and that, as he was tired of the English tune which had filled the gap for many years, he wished me to see whether I could not compose a Russian hymn.

"The problem appeared to me to be an extremely difficult and serious one. When I recalled the imposing British national anthem, 'God Save the King,' the very original French one and the really touching Austrian hymn, I felt and appreciated the necessity of writing something big, strong and moving; something national that should resound through a church as well as through the ranks of an army; something that could be taken up by a huge multitude and be within the reach of every man, from the dunce to the scholar. The idea absorbed me, but I was worried by the conditions thus imposed on the work with which I had been commissioned.

"One evening as I was returning home very late, I thought out and wrote down in a few minutes the tune of the hymn. The next day I called on Shoukovsky to ask him to write the words; but he was no musician and had much trouble to adapt them to the phrases of the first section of the melody.

"At last I was able to announce the completion of the hymn to Count von Benkendorf. The Emperor wished to hear it, and came on November 23 to the chapel of the Imperial Choir, accompanied by the Empress and the Grand Duke Michael. I had collected the whole body of choristers and re-enforced them by two orchestras. The sovereign asked for the hymn to be repeated several times, expressed a wish to hear it sung without accompaniment, and then had it played first of all by each orchestra separately and then finally by all the executants together. His Majesty turned to me and said in French: 'Why, it's superb!' and then and there gave orders to Count von Benkendorf to inform the Minister of War that the hymn was to be adopted for the army. The order to this effect was issued December 4, 1883. The first public performance of the hymn was on December 11, 1883, at the Grand Theater in Moscow. The Emperor seemed to want to submit my work to the judgment of the Moscow public. On December 25 the hymn resounded through the rooms of the Winter Palace on the occasion of the blessing of the colors.

"As proof of his satisfaction the Emperor graciously presented me with a gold snuff-box studded with diamonds, and in addition gave orders that the words 'God Save the Tsar' should be placed on the armorial bearings of the Lvov family."

Overture 1812, Opus 49

Although clearly a *pièce d'occasion* prompted by the commemoration of a crucial page in Russian history, the *Overture 1812* is a minor mystery in the Tschaikowsky catalogue. Supposedly Nicholas Rubinstein commissioned Tschaikowsky in 1880 to write a festival overture for the Moscow Exhibition. At least the composer admits as much in letters to Nadezhka von Meck and the conductor Napravnik.

But his friend Kashkin insisted the piece was requested for the ceremonies consecrating the Moscow Cathedral of the Saviour, intended to symbolize Russia's part in the Napoleonic struggle. The overture, accordingly, pictured the great events beginning with the Battle of Borodino (September 7, 1812) and ending with Napoleon's flight from Moscow, after the city was set aflame. To make it more effective, the work was to be performed in the public square before the cathedral. An electric connection on the conductor's desk would set off salvos of real artillery, and all Moscow would thrill with thoughts of its heroic past. In any case Tschaikowsky finished the overture at Kamenka in 1880, and though the cathedral was dedicated in the summer of 1881, there is no record of the planned street scene having come off.

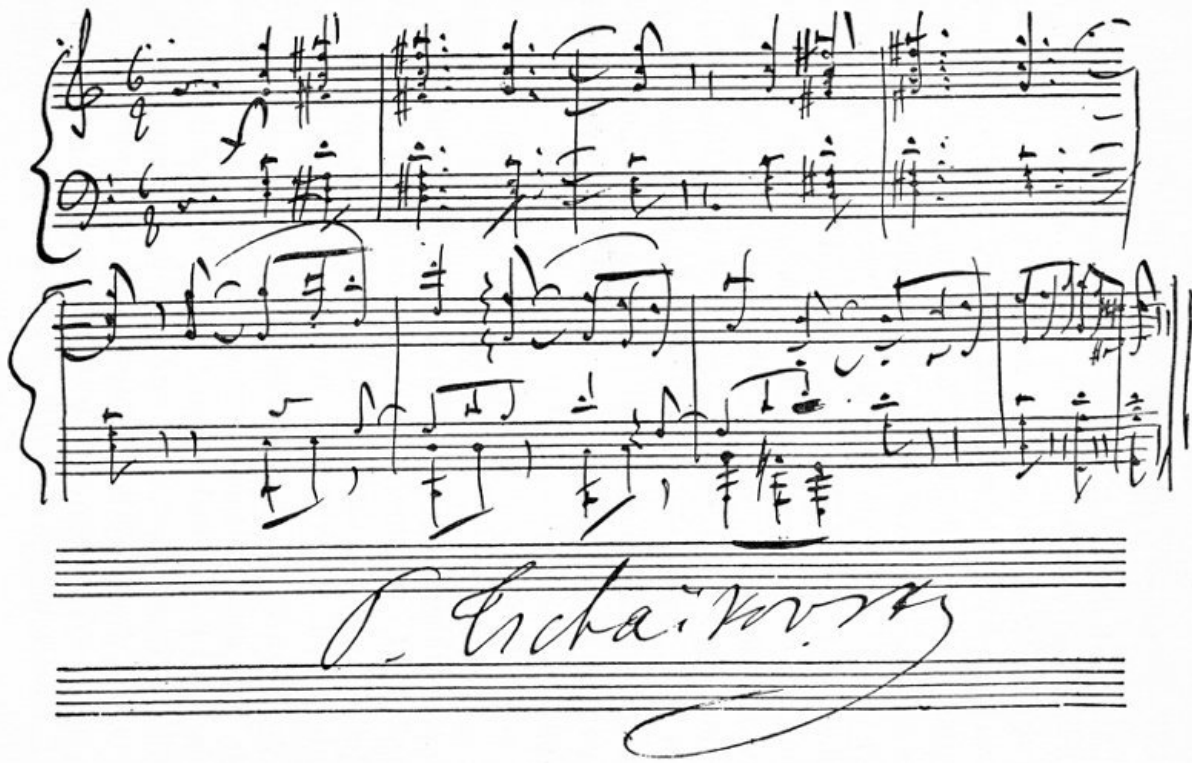
Instead, we find Tschaikowsky offering the overture to Eduard Napravnik, then directing the Imperial Musical Society of St. Petersburg: "Last winter, at Nicholas Rubinstein's request, I composed a Festival Overture for the concerts of the exhibition, entitled '1812.'" Tschaikowsky then makes a statement that possibly suggests an earlier rebuff: "Could you possibly manage to have this played? It is not of great value, and I shall not be at all surprised or hurt if you consider the style of the music unsuitable to a symphony concert." Apparently Napravnik turned down the overture, and its première was postponed to August 20, 1882, when it figured on an all-Tschaikowsky concert in the Art and Industrial Exhibition at Moscow.

Tschaikowsky's attitude to the work is further expressed in the letter to his patroness-saint Mme. von Meck. There he speaks of the overture as "very noisy" and having "no great artistic value" because it was written "without much warmth of enthusiasm." And in a diary entry of the time he refers to it as having "only local and patriotic significance."

The "patriotic significance," of course, is what gives the overture its *raison d'être* as a motion picture of historical events. Tschaikowsky's brushstrokes are bold and obvious. The French and Russians are clearly depicted through the use of the Czarist National Anthem and the *Marseillaise*. Fragments of Cossack and Novgorod folk songs enter the scheme, and the battle and fire scenes are as plain as pictures. As the overture develops, one envisions the clash of arms at Borodino, with the Russians stiffly disputing every step and the *Marseillaise* finally rising dominant. The Russians are hurled back; the French are in Moscow. Finally the city is ablaze and the dismal rout begins, as cathedral bells mingle with the roll of drums and the hymn, *God Preserve Thy People*, surges out in a paean of victory.

Capriccio Italien, Opus 45

Described by Edwin Evans as a "bundle of Italian folk-tunes," the *Capriccio Italien* draws partly on published collections of such melodies and partly on popular airs heard by Tschaikowsky in 1880 while touring Italy. "I am working on a sketch of an 'Italian Fantasia' based on folksongs," he notifies his patroness-confidante, Nadeshka von Meck, from Rome on February 17, 1880. "Thanks to the charming themes, some of which I have heard in the streets, the work will be effective."



A facsimile of a piece of Tschaikowsky's music, signed by the composer.

Tschaikowsky's room at the Hotel Constanzi overlooked the barracks of the Royal Cuirassiers. Apparently the bugle-call sounded nightly in the barracks yards contributed another theme "heard in the streets," for it may be heard in the trumpet passage of the introduction. The *Italian Fantasia* was fully sketched out in Rome and the orchestration begun. With the title now changed to *Capriccio Italien*, the work was completed that summer on Tschaikowsky's return to Russia. Nicholas Rubinstein directed the première at Moscow on December 18, 1880. Six years later Walter Damrosch introduced it to America at a concert in the Metropolitan Opera House, the precise date being November 6, 1886.

After the introductory section, the strings chant a lyric theme of slightly melancholy hue, which the orchestra then develops. Later the oboes announce, in thirds, a simple folk melody of less sombre character. This, too, is elaborately worked out, before the tempo changes and violins and flutes bring in another tune. This promptly subsides as a brisk march section sets in, followed by a return of the opening theme. There is a transition to a lively tarantella, then another bright theme in triple rhythm, and finally the Presto section, with a second tarantella motif leading to a brilliant close.

"It is a piece of music which relies entirely on its orchestration for its effects," writes Evans in the Master Musicians Series. "Its musical value is comparatively slight, but the coloring is so vivid and so fascinating, and the movement throughout so animated, that one does not realize this when listening to the work. It is only afterwards that one experiences certain pangs of regret that such a rich garment should bedeck so thin a figure."

Suite for Strings, *Souvenir de Florence*, Opus 70

Compared with his output in other forms, Tschaikowsky's chamber music is small, consisting of an early quartet, of which only the first movement survives, three complete string quartets, a trio, and the *Souvenir de Florence*, written for violins, violas, and 'cellos in pairs.

As the title implies, the work grew out of a visit to Italy early in 1890, though as a clew to the mood and manner of the music, *Souvenir de Florence* is a better title for the first two movements than for the others. The remaining *Allegretto moderato* and *Allegro vivace* bear an Italian "memory" only insofar as much other music by Tschaikowsky and other composers may share the same quality. Even a marked Slavic character is evident in places, which is only natural. As is well known, Tschaikowsky's overture-fantasy *Romeo and Juliet* is often dubbed "Romeo and Juliet of the Steppes."

A first mention of the *Souvenir* occurs in a letter to Ippolitoff-Ivanoff dated May 5, 1890, written shortly after Tschaikowsky's return from abroad. It is quoted by his brother Modeste: "My visit brought forth good fruit. I composed an opera, 'Pique Dame,' which seems a success to me.... My plans for the future are to finish the orchestration of the opera, sketch out a string sextet [the *Souvenir*], go to my sister at Kamenka for the end of the summer, and spend the whole autumn with you at Tiflis."

On the following June 30 he communicated news of the sextet to his patroness-saint Mme. von Meck, hoping she would be "pleased to hear" about it. "I know your love of chamber music," he writes, "and I hope the work will please you. I wrote it with the greatest enthusiasm and without the least exertion."

In November Tschaikowsky went to St. Petersburg for a rehearsal of *Pique Dame*. While there he arranged for a private hearing of the sextet by friends. The performance left him cold and he resolved to rewrite the Scherzo and Finale. By the following May the work was thoroughly remodelled. It was not till June, 1892, while in Paris, that he actually completed the revision to his satisfaction.

The four movements comprise an *Allegro con spirito* (D minor, 4-4), an *Adagio cantabile e con moto* (D major, 3-4), an *Allegretto moderato* (A minor, 2-4), and an *Allegro vivace* (D minor-D major, 2-4). The form is largely that of the classical string quartet, though characteristically bold and novel devices of color and structure abound. Often the strings are ingeniously treated to suggest wind instruments, and one senses Tschaikowsky's frequent striving for orchestral effects.

Research has failed to unearth the "opprobrious epithets" Tschaikowsky is alleged to have heaped upon this slight but appealing work.

Overture-Fantasy, *Romeo and Juliet*

Shortly before the overture-fantasy on Shakespeare's tragedy took shape in Tschaikowsky's mind, he had been jilted by the French soprano Désirée Artôt, then enjoying a prodigious vogue as opera singer in St. Petersburg. The twenty-eight-year-old composer and Mlle. Artôt had become engaged in 1868, but the lady promptly left him and married the Spanish baritone Padilla y Ramos. The theory is that Tschaikowsky's composition grew out of the resulting emotional upset, or at least that his frame of mind conduced to tragic expression on a romantic theme.

The Artôt episode acted as stimulus, but the concrete suggestion for using Shakespeare's tragedy in a symphonic work came from Balakireff during a walk with Tschaikowsky and their friend Kashkin "on a lovely day in May." Balakireff, head of the group of five young Russian composers (Tschaikowsky was not one of them) bent on achieving a pure national idiom, went so far as to outline the scheme to Tschaikowsky, unfolding the possibilities of dramatic and musical co-ordination so vividly that the young composer took eagerly to the project. Balakireff even furnished the keys and hints for themes and development.

However, four months went by before Tschaikowsky plunged into the actual composition of the overture-fantasy. Balakireff kept in close touch with him and virtually supervised the process. His dogmatism and narrowness often bored and irritated the young composer. Balakireff accepted this and rejected that, was pitilessly graphic in his comments, and yet somehow egged on the hypersensitive Tschaikowsky to completion of a taxing assignment. Finally, in January of the following year, Balakireff and Rimsky-Korsakoff came to visit him and he could write: "My overture pleased them very much and it also pleases me." Still, the Moscow public responded coolly, and Tschaikowsky felt obliged to revise much of the score that summer. Further rewriting was done for the definitive edition brought out in 1881.

The thematic scheme is easy to follow. Friar Laurence takes his bow in a solemn andante introduction for clarinets and bassoons in F-sharp minor. The feud of the Montagues and Capulets rages in a B minor allegro. Romeo and Juliet enter via muted violins and English horn in a famous theme in D-flat major suggesting Tschaikowsky's song *Wer nur die Sehnsucht kennt* ("None But the Lonely Heart"). The strife-torn Montagues and Capulets return for another bout. Chords of muted violins and violas hinting at mystery and secrecy bring back the love music. The themes of Romeo and Juliet, the embattled families, and Friar Laurence are heard in succession, followed by a fierce orchestral crash, and the storm subsides to a roll of kettledrums.

Francesca da Rimini, Fantasia for Orchestra (After Dante), Opus 32

Written in 1876, Tschaikowsky's symphonic treatment of the celebrated love story of Paolo and Francesca grew out of an original project for an opera on the same subject. He abandoned the idea of an opera when the libretto submitted to him proved impossible. Later Tschaikowsky again read through the fifth canto of Dante's *Inferno*, in which the tragedy is related. Stirred by the verses and also by Gustave Doré's illustrations, he resolved to write an orchestral fantasy on the subject.

Prefacing the score are the following lines from Dante's great poem:

"Dante arrives in the second circle of hell. He sees that here the incontinent are punished, and their punishment is to be continually tormented by the crudest winds under a dark and gloomy air. Among these tortured ones he recognizes Francesca da Rimini, who tells her story.

"... There is no greater pain than to recall a happy time in wretchedness; and this thy teacher knows. But if thou hast such desire to learn the first root of our love, I will do like one who weeps and tells.

"One day, for pastime, we read of Lancelot, how love constrained him. We were alone, and without all suspicion. Several times reading urged our eyes to meet, and changed the color of our faces. But one moment alone it was that overcame us. When we read of how the fond smile was kissed by such a lover, he, who shall never be divided from me, kissed my mouth all trembling. The book, and he who wrote it, was a Galeotto. That day we read in it no farther.'

"While the one spirit thus spake, the other wept so that I fainted with pity, as if I had been dying; and fell, as a dead body falls."

Tschaikowsky used to insist that the following titles be given in the program-book at performances of his fantasia:

- I. Introduction: The gateway to the Inferno
("Leave all hope behind, all ye who enter here")
Tortures and agonies of the condemned.
- II. Francesca tells the story of her tragic love for Paolo.
- III. The turmoil of Hades. Conclusion.

The composition starts with a descriptive setting, in which a sinister, gruesome picture is painted of the second circle of Dante's *Inferno*. The awesome scene, with its haunting, driving winds, desolate moans, and dread terror, is repeated at the end. In the middle occurs a section featuring a clarinet in a plaintive and tender melody heard against string pizzicati. This instantly evokes the image of Francesca telling her tragic tale, which mounts in fervor and reaches its shattering crisis, before the wailing winds of Dante's netherworld close in again.

BALLET SUITES

Suite from the Ballet, *Swan Lake (Le Lac des Cygnes)*

All told, Tschaikowsky wrote three ballets, plus a scattering of incidental dances for operas, beginning with the surviving "Voyevode" fragments. The composition of *Swan Lake*, first of the trio—the others being *The Sleeping Beauty* and *The Nutcracker*—originated in a twofold impulse, the need for ready cash and a fondness for French ballet music, especially the works of Delibes and the *Giselle* of Adolphe Adam, which Tschaikowsky regarded as archetype.

He evidently thought little of his initial effort, for shortly after the Moscow production of *Swan Lake* he recorded in his diary: "Lately I have heard Delibes' very clever music. 'Swan Lake' is poor stuff compared to it. Nothing during the last few years has charmed me so greatly as this ballet of Delibes and 'Carmen'." Per contra, the same entry bemoans the "deterioration" of German music, the immediate offender being the "cold, obscure and pretentious" C minor symphony of Brahms!

Tschaikowsky was probably sincere when he described his own ballet as “poor stuff” compared with Delibes’. That was in 1877. Performances of *Swan Lake* at the Bolshoi Theater had been flat, shabby, and badly costumed. A conductor inexperienced with elaborate ballet scores had directed. Modeste Tschaikowsky, in the biography of his brother, testifies to this. Numbers were omitted as “undanceable,” and pieces from other ballets substituted. At length only a third of the original remained, and not the best. The ballet dropped out of the Moscow repertory, and it was not until 1894 that the enterprising Marius Petipa wrote to Moscow for the full score and produced *Swan Lake* with brilliant success at the Maryinsky Theater in St. Petersburg, on January 15, 1895. It has since remained a repertory staple, both the current Ballets Russes and the Ballet Theatre having staged it successfully. Pavlova, Karsavina, and Markova, among others, have interpreted the heroine Odette, and Prince Siegfried has been embodied by Nijinsky, Lifar, Mordkin, and Dolin. *Swan Lake* was one of the first ballets witnessed in his youth by Serge Diaghileff, founder of the famous Ballets Russes.

Tschaikowsky first refers to *Swan Lake* in a letter to Rimsky-Korsakoff, dated September 10, 1875: “I accepted the work partly because I need the money and because I have long cherished a desire to try my hand at this type of music.” V. P. Begitché, stage manager of the Bolshoi, offered 800 roubles (less than \$500) and in turn granted Tschaikowsky’s request for a story from the Age of Chivalry, making the sketch himself. Tschaikowsky set to work in August, 1875, and had the first two acts planned out in a fortnight, but the score was not completed till the following March and for some reason held up for performance until February, 1877.

The story, possibly of Rhenish origin, tells how Prince Siegfried woos and wins Odette, the Swan Queen. At a celebration the prince is told he must soon choose a bride. A flight of swans overhead distracts him and a hunt is proposed. Siegfried and the hunters are at the lake-side. It is evening. Odette appears surrounded by a bevy of swan-maidens. She begs the hunters to spare the swans. They are maidens under the spell of the enchanter Rotbart. Swans by day, they return briefly to human form at midnight. The prince and Odette fall in love. Siegfried swears she will be his wife. Odette cautions him about Rotbart’s evil power. Breach of promise will mean her death. Rotbart brings his own daughter to the court ball, disguised as Odette. Siegfried makes the false choice of bride, and the pledge is broken. Discovering Rotbart’s ruse, he hastens to Odette, who at first rebuffs him. Siegfried blames Rotbart and Odette relents. At length Rotbart whips up a storm which floods the forest. When Siegfried vows he will die with Odette, Rotbart’s spell is shattered and all ends happily.

Tschaikowsky’s close friend and collaborator Kashkin is authority for the statement that an adagio section in *Swan Lake* was a love-duet in the opera *Undine* before it found new lodgings. Conversely, a Danse Russe in the group of piano pieces, Op. 40, was written for *Swan Lake*, thus balancing matters. Like *The Sleeping Beauty* and *The Nutcracker*, *Swan Lake* is famed for its waltz. The score brims with typical Tschaikowskian melody, and probably for the first time in ballet music a scheme of leitmotifs is used, two of the principal subjects being the tremulous theme of the swans in flight and the hauntingly wistful theme of Odette herself, assigned to the oboe against soft strings and harp arpeggios. The music adjusts itself snugly to the technic of pure classical ballet and solos and ensembles are contrasted adroitly.

Suite from the Ballet, *The Sleeping Beauty*, Opus 66

Based on Perrault’s famous fairy tale, Tschaikowsky’s *Sleeping Beauty* ballet dates from the summer of 1889. Its music is generally regarded as superior to that of the *Swan Lake* ballet and inferior to that of the *Nutcracker* suite. Few ballet scores are so suitable in mood and style for the action they accompany. The music is truly melodious in Tschaikowsky’s lighter vein. The fantasy is conveyed in bright, glittering colors, and, as Mrs. Newmarch pointed out, the music “never descends to the commonplace level of the ordinary ballet music.” There are thirty numbers in all, many of them, especially the waltz, endearing in their lilting and haunting grace. The work was first produced in St. Petersburg on January 2, 1890. In the early twenties, Diaghileff, the great ballet producer, revived the work in London and elsewhere with immense artistic *éclat*. Fragments of the ballet have been gathered in the Monte Carlo Ballet Russe’s production of *Aurora’s Wedding*.

Suite from the Ballet, *The Nutcracker*, Opus 71-a

The usual fit of depression assailed Tschaikowsky while composing the music for his *Nutcracker* ballet, based on E. T. A. Hoffmann’s story *Nussknacker und Mausekönig* (“Nutcracker and Mouse King”). Commissioned by the St. Petersburg Opera early in 1891, the work was slow in taking shape. At length, on June 25, Tschaikowsky completed the sketches for the projected ballet. What had taken him weeks should have been finished in five days, he lamented. “No, the old man is breaking up,” he wrote. “Not only does his hair drop out, or turn as white as snow; not only does he lose his teeth, which refuse their service; not only do his eyes weaken and tire easily; not only do his feet walk badly, or drag themselves along, but, bit by bit, he loses the capacity to do anything at all. The ballet is infinitely worse than ‘The Sleeping Beauty’—so much is certain.”

Apparently the first night audience agreed with him, for at the première in the Imperial Opera House, the response was chilling. Yet an earlier concert performance of the music had drawn plaudits from both public and press. The ballet’s failure, however, was easy to explain. The producer, Marius Petipa, fell ill, and the work of staging the new ballet was entrusted to a man of inadequate skill and experience. Then, the audience found it hard to thrill to the spectacle of children dashing coyly about in the first act. And balletomanes, accustomed to beauty and glamor in their favorite ballerinas, found the girl dancing the part of the Sugarplum Fairy anything but appetizing to look at.

Act I of the ballet is concerned with a Christmas Tree party. The scene is overrun with children and mechanical dolls. Little Marie is drawn to a German Nutcracker, which is made to resemble an old man with huge jaws. During a game, some boys accidentally break the Nutcracker. Marie is saddened by the tragedy. That night she lies awake in bed, sleepless with grief over the broken utensil. Finally, she jumps out of bed and goes to take one more look at the beloved Nutcracker. Suddenly strange sounds reach her ears. Mice! The Tree now seems to come to life and grow massive. Toys begin to stir into action, followed by cakes and candies. Even the Nutcracker creaks into life. Presently a battle arises between the mice and the toys. The Nutcracker challenges the Mouse King to a duel. Just as the Nutcracker is about to be felled, Marie hurls a shoe and kills the royal rodent. And of course, the Nutcracker promptly is transformed into a handsome prince. Arm in arm, they leave for his magic kingdom.

The scene now changes to a mountain of jam for the second act. This is the land ruled by the Sugarplum Fairy, who is awaiting the arrival of Marie and her princely escort. The court cheers jubilantly when the happy pair appears on the scene. What follows is the series of dances usually heard in the concert hall. The sequence runs as follows:

Miniature Overture (Allegro giusto, B-flat, 4-4), featuring two sharply differentiated themes, scored largely for the higher instruments.

March (Tempo di marcia vivo, G major, 4-4), in which the main theme is chanted by clarinets, horns and trumpets, as the children make their measured entrance.

Dance of the Sugarplum Fairy (Andante con moto, E minor, 2-4). Here the celesta gives out the entrancing melody, with pizzicato strings

accompanying.

Russian Dance: Trepak (Tempo di trepak, molto vivace, G major, 2-4), which grows out of a brisk rhythmic figure heard at the beginning.

Arabian Dance (Allegretto, G minor, 3-8). Intended to convey the idea of “Coffee.” A melody in Oriental mood is announced by the clarinet, later picked up by the violins.

Chinese Dance (Allegretto moderato, B-flat major, 4-4). Intended to convey the idea of “Tea.” The melody is given to the flute against a pizzicato figure sustained by bassoons and double basses.

Dance of the Mirlitons (Moderato assai, D major, 2-4). For the main theme three flutes join forces. Then comes a different melody given out by the trumpets in F-sharp minor before the chief subject is back.

Waltz of the Flowers (Tempo di valse, D major, 3-4). Woodwinds and horns, aided by a harp-cadenza, offer some introductory phrases. Then the horns give out the fetching main melody. Soon the clarinets take it up. Flute, oboe, and strings bring in other themes, and the waltz comes to a brilliant close.

CONCERTOS

Concerto for Violin and Orchestra, in D major, Opus 35

Before occupying its permanent niche in the repertory, Tschaikowsky’s violin concerto had to run a fierce gantlet of fault-finding. Friend and foe alike took pokes at it. The wonder is that it survived at all. Even Mme. von Meck, Tschaikowsky’s patroness-saint, picked serious flaws in the work, and the lady was known for her unwavering faith in Tschaikowsky’s genius.

As a matter of fact, Tschaikowsky, often an unsparing critic of his own music, started the trend by finding objection with the Andante and rewriting it whole. That was in April, 1878. He was spending the spring at Clarens, Switzerland. Joseph Kotek, a Russian violinist and composer, was staying with him. Tschaikowsky and Kotek went over the work several times, and evidently saw eye-to-eye on its merits.

Then came the first outside rebuff. Mme. von Meck was frankly dissatisfied and showed why in detail. Tschaikowsky meekly wrote back pleading guilty on some counts but advancing the hope that in time his Lady Bountiful might come to like the concerto. He stood pat on the first movement, which Mme. von Meck particularly assailed.

“Your frank judgment on my violin concerto pleased me very much,” he writes. “It would have been very disagreeable to me if you, from any fear of wounding the petty pride of a composer, had kept back your opinion. However, I must defend a little the first movement of the concerto.

“Of course, it houses, as does every piece that serves virtuoso purposes, much that appeals chiefly to the mind; nevertheless, the themes are not painfully evolved: the plan of this movement sprang suddenly in my head and quickly ran into its mould. I shall not give up the hope that in time the piece will give you greater pleasure.”

Next came a more serious setback from Leopold Auer, the widely respected Petersburg virtuoso. Auer was then professor of violin at the Imperial Conservatory and the Czar’s court violinist. Tschaikowsky, hoping to induce Auer to launch the concerto on its career, originally dedicated the work to him. But Auer glanced through the score and promptly decided against it. It was “impossible to play.”

Tschaikowsky later made a quaintly worded entry in his diary to the effect that Auer’s pronouncement cast “this unfortunate child of my imagination for many years to come into the limbo of hopelessly forgotten things.” Justly or unjustly, he even suspected Auer of having prevailed on the violinist Emile Sauret to abstain from playing it in St. Petersburg.

The ice finally broke when Adolf Brodsky, after two years of admitted laziness and indecision, took it up and succeeded in performing it with the Vienna Philharmonic on December 4, 1881. Yet, even Brodsky, despite his wholehearted espousal of the work, complained to Tschaikowsky that he had “crammed too many difficulties into it.” Previously, in Paris, Brodsky had experimented with the concerto by playing it to Laroche, who, whether because of Brodsky’s rendering or the concerto’s inherent character, confessed “he could gain no true idea of the work.”

Even the première went against the new concerto. In the first place Brodsky had to do some strong propagandizing to get Hans Richter to include the work on a Philharmonic program. Then, only one rehearsal was granted. The orchestral parts, according to Brodsky, “swarmed with errors.” At the rehearsal nobody liked the new work. Besides, Richter wanted to make cuts, but Brodsky promptly scotched the idea. Finally, during the performance, the musicians, still far from having mastered the music, accompanied everything pianissimo, “not to go smash.”

Of course, Brodsky outlines the chain of contretemps in a letter to Tschaikowsky partly to assuage the composer’s pained feelings on receiving news of the Vienna fiasco. For the première ended with a broadside of hisses, completely obliterating the polite applause coming from some friendly quarters. As the *coup de grâce* Eduard Hanslick, Europe’s uncrowned ruler of musical destinies, wrote a scathing notice, which Philip Hale rendered as follows:

“For a while the concerto has proportion, is musical, and is not without genius, but soon savagery gains the upper hand and lords it to the end of the first movement.

“The violin is no longer played. It is yanked about. It is torn asunder. It is beaten black and blue. I do not know whether it is possible for any one to conquer these hair-raising difficulties, but I do know that Mr. Brodsky martyred his hearers as well as himself.

“The Adagio, with its tender national melody, almost conciliates, almost wins us. But it breaks off abruptly to make way for a finale that puts us in the midst of the brutal and wretched jollity of a Russian kermess. We see wild and vulgar faces, we hear curses, we smell bad brandy.

“Friedrich Vischer once asserted in reference to lascivious paintings that there are pictures which ‘stink in the eye.’ Tschaikowsky’s violin concerto brings to us for the first time the horrid idea that there may be music that stinks in the ear.”

The pestiferous odors of the Hanslick blast further embittered Tschaikowsky’s already gloomy disposition, and it is not surprising to learn that the review haunted him till the day he died. But Brodsky’s unflagging devotion to the concerto, together with his practical missionary zeal in acquainting the European public with it, finally started the concerto on its path of glory.

"Nor was that the end of time's revenges," wrote Pitts Sanborn. "Hanslick was to write glowingly of the '*Pathétique*' symphony, and in due course Leopold Auer not only played the unplayable concerto himself, but made a specialty of teaching it to his pupils, who have carried its gospel the world over. But while the belated triumphs were accruing Tschaikowsky died."

The dedication is to Brodsky, who certainly earned it.

The first movement (*Allegro moderato*, D major, 4-4), opens with a melody for strings and woodwind. Then the solo violin is heard in a cadenza-like sequence followed by the first theme (*Moderato assai*). A second theme, *Molto espressivo*, is next discoursed by the violin in A major. Instead of the usual development there is an intricate cadenza without accompaniment. A long and brilliant coda concludes the movement.

The second movement (*Canzonetta: Andante*, 3-4) starts with the muted solo violin chanting, after a brief preface, a nostalgic theme in G minor. The flute and clarinet then offer the first phrase of this theme, and later the solo violin unreels a Chopinesque second subject, in E-flat major, *con anima*. The clarinet offers an obbligato of arpeggios when the first theme returns. The rousing finale is an *Allegro vivacissimo* in D major, 2-4.

The Rondo-like last movement, typically Russian in theme and rhythm, develops from two folk-like melodies. Listeners will be reminded of the well-known Russian dance, the Trepak, in this movement. The music builds up at a brisk pace to a crashing climax.

Concerto for Piano and Orchestra, in B-flat Minor, No. 1, Opus 23

Like the violin concerto, Tschaikowsky's great piano concerto in B-flat minor went through a gruelling ordeal of abusive rebuffs and setbacks before becoming established as one of the world's most beloved symphonic scores. In the case of the violin work, it was Leopold Auer who first flouted it as unplayable, and then made it a popular repertory standby. Nicholas Rubinstein is the name linked with the early stages of the piano concerto. After excoriating the concerto in its first state, Rubinstein grew to like it, humbly apologized for his blunder, and made practical amends by playing it in public with huge success.

Early in its composition we find Tschaikowsky writing to his brother Anatol: "I am so completely absorbed in the composition of a piano concerto. I am anxious that Rubinstein should play it at his concert. The work proceeds very slowly and does not turn out well. However, I stick to my intentions and hammer piano passages out of my brain; the result is nervous irritability." Begun in November, 1874, the concerto was completed the following month. Rubinstein was then invited to hear the work. Rubinstein and one or two musical colleagues gathered in one of the classrooms of the Moscow Conservatory. Unluckily, the great man was in a sombre mood that day. Tschaikowsky sat down and played the first movement. No comment from Rubinstein. Then he played the Andantino. Still no comment. Finally, Tschaikowsky ran through the last movement. He turned around expectantly. Rubinstein said nothing. Uneasily, Tschaikowsky asked him pointblank: "What do you think of it?" And the storm broke. It was vulgar, cheap, pianistic, completely valueless, retorted Rubinstein, who then stepped up to the piano and began to burlesque the music.

"I left the room without saying a word and went upstairs," writes the distraught Tschaikowsky. "I could not have spoken for anger and agitation. Presently Rubinstein came to me and, seeing how upset I was, called me into another room. There he repeated that my concerto was impossible, pointed out many places where it needed to be completely revised, and said that if I would suit the concerto to his requirements, he would bring it out at his concert.

"'I shall not alter a single note,' he replied. 'I shall publish the work precisely as it stands.' This intention I actually carried out." Tschaikowsky did make some alterations in the score, however.

Tschaikowsky changed his mind about dedicating the score to Rubinstein, conferring the honor on Hans Von Bülow, instead. Von Bülow played the world première in Boston on October 25, 1875, and in a letter to the Russian composer conveyed his enthusiasm for the work: "The ideas are so original, so noble, so powerful; the details are so interesting, and though there are many of them they do not impair the clearness and the unity of the work. The form is so mature, ripe, distinguished for style, for intention and labor are everywhere concealed. I should weary you if I were to enumerate all the characteristics of your work—characteristics which compel me to congratulate equally the composer as well as all those who shall enjoy the work actively or passively respectively." Later Tschaikowsky, reading reports of how Americans were acclaiming his concerto, wrote: "Think what healthy appetites these Americans must have! Each time Bülow was obliged to repeat the whole finale of my concerto! Nothing like this happens in our own country."

The concerto opens with a striking theme, *Allegro non troppo e molto maestoso*, in D-flat major, 3-4, familiar to music-lovers of all tastes the world over. The strings take it up after some brief preluding, and it is then repeated, with rhythmic modification, by the solo piano. There is a piano cadenza, and the theme comes back by way of the strings, minus double-basses, against an ascending obbligato from the piano. For reasons best known to himself, Tschaikowsky never allows this imposing theme to return to the scene.

The "blind beggar tune" is the name often applied to the piano theme serving as chief subject of the main section of the first movement (*Allegro con spirito*, B-flat minor). Tschaikowsky heard it sung on a street in Kamenko and he wrote to his patroness-friend, Mme. von Meck: "It is curious that in Russia every blind beggar sings exactly the same tune with the same refrain. I have used part of this refrain in my piano concerto." Horns and woodwind discourse the second subject (*Poco meno mosso*, A-flat major) before the solo instrument turns to it.

The song-like first theme of the second movement (*Andantino semplice*, D-flat major, 6-8) is given out first by the flute, with the oboe and clarinets bringing in the second subject against a bassoon accompaniment. The *Prestissimo* middle section in F major, has the spirit of a scherzo. A waltz enters the scheme by way of violas and 'cellos. Tschaikowsky's brother, Modeste, insisted the theme of this waltz derived from a French song the brothers Tschaikowsky used to sing and whistle in their boyhood days.

The Rondo-like finale develops from three themes, the first of which, a lively dance in Cossack style, is given out by the piano. A further folk-like quality is observable in the second theme, and the violins later chant the third of the finale's themes. In the brisk Coda the Cossack-like first theme is given the dominant role.

SYMPHONIES

Symphony in F minor, No. 4, Opus 36

At first sight, this symphony arouses no "cherchez la femme" mystery. Seemingly, the lady is not far to seek. In fact, Tschaikowsky throws off the

search in his dedication. The lady is Madame Nadia Filaretovna von Meck. She was his loyal confidante and benefactress. The least Tschaikowsky could do was to dedicate a symphony to her. Comfort and encouragement in the form of checks and adulatory letters from Mme. von Meck saw the sorrowing Slav through many bleak periods.

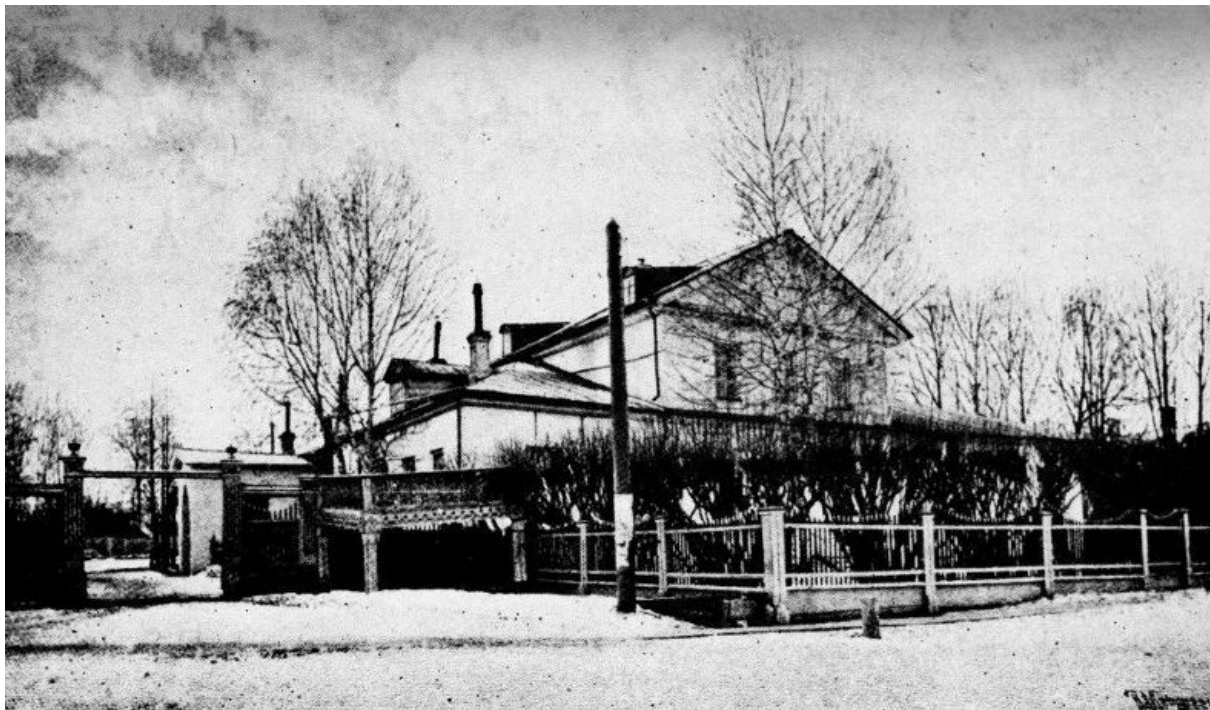
The association has been called “the most amazing romance in musical history.” That the “romance” was purely platonic does not make it any the less “amazing.” Whatever Mme. von Meck’s secret hopes and longings, Tschaikowsky shrank from carrying the liaison beyond epistolary scope. Mme. von Meck resigned herself to an advisory role of patroness-friend, and played it nobly. The world reveres her for it. “*Our* symphony,” Tschaikowsky wrote to her, communicating his intention to dedicate the Fourth to her. “I believe you will find in it echoes of your deepest thoughts and feelings.”

What Tschaikowsky meant, of course, was “*my* deepest thoughts and feelings.” The plural possessive, “*ours*,” is gallant rather than collaborative. Even so, he could with more truth than courtesy have written to another woman, Antonina Ivanovna Miliukov, in similar style. Antonina was Tschaikowsky’s wife in a domestic farce lasting two weeks. The whole episode—spanning a wild sequence of engagement, marriage, flight in the night, attempted suicide, separation—nestles snugly in the period of the symphony’s origin. Antonina would have understood the words “*our* symphony.” Only fate and brother Anatol saved it from becoming Tschaikowsky’s obituary. Not that it was Antonina’s fault. Far from it. But no psychological analysis of the Fourth can be complete without her.

The girl was a conservatory pupil. Tschaikowsky’s music acted like magic on her. Through it she came to a slavish worship of the composer. Next followed written avowals of love sizzling with passion. At first Tschaikowsky was amused, then alarmed, finally haunted. The girl was persistent. Her pleas grew piteous. To make matters worse, Tschaikowsky was immersed in his romantic opera *Eugene Onegin* at the time. He had just composed music for Tatiana’s impassioned love-letter to Onegin. Antonina’s plight was too much like the spurned Tatiana’s to be lost on Tschaikowsky’s sensitive nature. Onegin’s cold disdain had virtually wrecked the girl’s life. Antonina might even kill herself. Tschaikowsky saw himself as another and more heartless Onegin. The situation probably stroked his vanity, too.

He made a naïve offer of friendship. It only stirred up more trouble. He finally granted a meeting. Antonina had won. The girl was deaf to his self-depiction as a morose, ill-tempered neurotic who would assuredly drive her mad. Antonina knew better. No, there was only one way out—marriage. Tschaikowsky became engaged. He repented at leisure. Attempts to break the engagement proved futile. Antonina was bent on becoming Mrs. Tschaikowsky. They were married. A few days later Tschaikowsky fled for his sanity. They were reconciled. There followed two hellish weeks of tragi-farcical life together in Moscow. One night, in a wild daze, Tschaikowsky fled again. He wandered about wildly and reached the Moscow River. He had made up his mind. He stood neck-deep in the water, hoping to freeze to death. He was rescued in time.

Though for long he “bordered on insanity,” somehow he came through the crisis with most of his mind. His brother Anatol took him to Switzerland. Slowly Tschaikowsky got back to normal. He never saw Antonina Ivanovna again. The clinical aspects of the case have been thoroughly aired in recent years. The publication of long-withheld letters throw fresh light on Tschaikowsky’s temperament. Antonina and he were mentally and physically incompatible. Despite the fearful suicidal state into which his marriage plunged him, Tschaikowsky never made a harsh reference to his wife. Antonina, for her part, graciously cleared him in her memoirs. “Peter was in no way to blame,” she wrote.



The house at Votinsk, in western Russia, where Tschaikowsky was born and where he spent the early years of his life before his family moved to St. Petersburg.



Mme. Nadeshka von Meck, Tschaikowsky's life-long benefactress, whom he corresponded with but never met

During this period, which extends from May to September, 1877, Tschaikowsky worked on his Fourth Symphony. Just how much of his private woes were transmuted into symphonic speech cannot be determined, even from Tschaikowsky's own written confidences. Possibly, the symphony was an avenue of escape from his mounting anxieties. Anyway, his completion of the sketch coincides with his engagement to Antonina in May. The orchestration of the first movement took up a month, from August 11 to September 12—the breathing spell between his two flights from Antonina. Then followed the nerve-racking fortnight in Moscow. The other three movements were completed in the Swiss Alps, where, thanks to his brother, he regained his full sanity and working tempo. A passage in a letter to Mme. von Meck, during the Antonina regime, suggests an explanation of Tschaikowsky's abstract talk of Fate in connection with his Fourth: "We cannot escape our fate, and there was something fatalistic about my meeting with this girl." In January, 1878, when the whole dismal affair was safely locked away in the past, he wrote to

Mme. von Meck that he could only recall his marriage as a bad dream:

“Something remote, a weird nightmare in which a man bearing my name, my likeness, and my consciousness acted as one acts in dreams: in a meaningless, disconnected, paradoxical way. That was not my sane self, in possession of logical and reasonable will-powers. Everything I then did bore the character of an unhealthy conflict between will and intelligence, which is nothing less than insanity.”

Tschaikowsky wrote to the composer Taneieff that there was not a single bar in his Fourth Symphony which he had not truly felt and which was not an echo of his “most intimate self.” He frankly avowed the symphony’s “programmatic” character, but declared it was “impossible to give the program in words.” Yet, to Mme. von Meck, who insisted on knowing the full spiritual and emotional content of the symphony, he wrote out a detailed analysis which has long been familiar to concert audiences. In reading it the listener usually does one of three things: takes it literally; regards it as irrelevant to the music as such; relates it to Tschaikowsky’s private life. There is the fourth choice of combining all three. In that choice lies the synthesis of mind, emotion, and external stimuli which is regarded as the very stuff of art.

“Our symphony has a program,” he writes. “That is to say, it is possible to express its contents in words, and I will tell you—and you alone—the meaning of the entire work and its separate movements. Naturally I can only do so as regards its general features.

“The Introduction is the kernel, the quintessence, the chief thought of the whole symphony. This is Fate, the fatal power which hinders one in the pursuit of happiness from gaining the goal, which jealously provides that peace and comfort do not prevail, that the sky is not free from clouds—a might that swings, like the sword of Damocles, constantly over the head, that poisons continually the soul. This might is overpowering and invincible. There is nothing to do but to submit and vainly to complain.

“The feeling of despondency and despair grows ever stronger and more passionate. It is better to turn from the realities and to lull oneself in dreams. O joy! What a fine sweet dream! A radiant being, promising happiness, floats before me and beckons me. The importunate first dream of the Allegro is now heard afar off, and now the soul is wholly enwrapped with dreams. There is no thought of gloom and cheerlessness. Happiness! Happiness! Happiness! No, they are only dreams, and Fate dispels them. The whole of life is only a constant alternation between dismal reality and flattering dreams of happiness. There is no port: you will be tossed hither and thither by the waves until the sea swallows you. Such is the program, in substance, of the first movement.

“The second movement shows another phase of sadness. Here is that melancholy feeling which enwraps one when he sits at night alone in the house exhausted by work; the book which he had taken to read has slipped from his hand; a swarm of reminiscences has arisen. How sad it is that so much has already *been* and *gone*! And yet it is a pleasure to think of the early years. One mourns the past and has neither the courage nor the will to begin a new life. One is rather tired of life. One wishes to recruit his strength and to look back, to revive many things in the memory. One thinks on the gladsome hours when the young blood boiled and bubbled and there was satisfaction in life. One thinks also on the sad moments, on irrevocable losses. And all this is now so far away, so far away. And it is also sad and yet so sweet to muse over the past.

“There is no determined feeling, no exact expression in the third movement. Here are capricious arabesques, vague figures which slip into the imagination when one has taken wine and is slightly intoxicated. The mood is now gay, now mournful. One thinks about nothing; one gives the fancy loose rein, and there is pleasure in drawings of marvellous lines. Suddenly rush into the imagination the picture of a drunken peasant and a gutter-song. Military music is heard passing by in the distance. These are disconnected pictures which come and go in the brain of the sleeper. They have nothing to do with reality; they are unintelligible, bizarre, out-at-elbows.

“Fourth movement. If you had no pleasure in yourself, look about you. Go to the people. See how they can enjoy life and give themselves up entirely to festivity. The picture of a folk-holiday. Hardly have we had time to forget ourselves in the happiness of others when indefatigable Fate reminds us once more of its presence. The other children of men are not concerned with us. They do not spare us a glance nor stop to observe that we are lonely and sad. How merry and glad they all are. All their feelings are so inconsequent, so simple. And you still say that all the world is immersed in sorrow? There still *is* happiness, simple, native happiness. Rejoice in the happiness of others—and you can still live.”

Symphony in E minor, No. 5, Opus 64

If surroundings alone determined the mood of a piece of music, Tschaikowsky’s Fifth Symphony, composed one summer in a country villa near Klin, would be a sunlit idyl. Of course it is nothing of the sort, for though Tschaikowsky responded keenly to outdoor beauty, he was a prey to gloomy thoughts and visions that constantly found their way into his music. His own inner world crowded out the other. Frolovskoe, where he wrote his symphony in 1888, was a charming spot, fringed by a forest. Between spurts of composing he took long walks in the woods and pattered around the villa garden.

On his return from Italy two years later he found that the forest had been cut down. “All those dear shady spots that were there last year are now a bare wilderness,” he grieved to his brother Modeste. Ironically, Tschaikowsky also composed his *Hamlet* overture in the sylvan retreat at Frolovskoe, though from his own and others’ descriptions, the place was an ideal setting for an *As You Like It* symphonic fantasy, say.

The first intimation that Tschaikowsky was considering a new symphony appears in a letter to his brother Modeste dated May 27, 1888. A dread that he had written himself out as composer had been steadily gaining a grip on Tschaikowsky’s mind. He had complained about his imagination being “dried up.” He felt no urge to write. Finally he resolved to shake off the mood and convince the world and himself there were still a few good tunes in him.

“I am hoping to collect, little by little, material for a symphony,” he writes to his brother on May 27. The following month we find him inquiring of his lady bountiful, Nadezhka von Meck: “Have I told you that I intended to write a symphony? The beginning has been difficult; but now inspiration seems to have come. However, we shall see.” In the same letter he makes no bones about his intention to prove that he is not “played out as a composer.”

On August 6 he reported progress on the new work. “I have orchestrated half the symphony,” he writes. “My age, although I am not very old, begins to tell on me. I become very tired, and I can no longer play the piano or read at night as I used to do.” Ill health troubled him during the summer months, but by August 26 he was able to announce the completion of the symphony. At first he was dissatisfied with it. Even the favorable verdict of a group of musical friends, among them Taneieff, did no good. Early performances of the symphony only strengthened Tschaikowsky’s misgivings. The work was premièred in St. Petersburg on November 17, 1888, with Tschaikowsky conducting. A second performance followed on November 24, at a concert of the Musical Society, with the composer again conducting. Then came a performance in Prague. The public was enthusiastic. The critics, on the other hand, almost unanimously attacked it as unworthy of Tschaikowsky’s powers. In a letter to Mme. von Meck in December he expressed frank disgust with the symphony:

"Having played my symphony twice in Petersburg and once in Prague, I have come to the conclusion that it is a failure. There is something repellent in it, some over-exaggerated color, some insincerity of fabrication which the public instinctively recognizes. It was clear to me that the applause and ovations referred not to this but to other works of mine, and that the symphony itself will never please the public. All this causes a deep dissatisfaction with myself.

"It is possible that I have, as people say, written myself out, and that nothing remains but for me to repeat and imitate myself. Yesterday evening I glanced over the Fourth Symphony, *our* symphony. How superior to this one, how much better it is! Yes, this is a very, very sad fact." A composer who was still to write the *Hamlet* overture-fantasy, the *Sleeping Beauty* and *Nutcracker* ballets, the opera *Pique Dame*, and the *Pathetic* symphony, was anything but "written out," as Tchaikowsky feared!

After the symphony triumphed in both Moscow and Hamburg, Tchaikowsky speedily changed his mind and wrote to his publisher Davidoff: "I like it far better now, after having held a bad opinion of it for some time." He speaks of the Hamburg performance as "magnificent," but expresses his old complaint about the Russian press, that it "continues to ignore me," and bemoans the fact that "with the exception of those nearest and dearest to me, no one will ever hear of my successes." Modeste Tchaikowsky attributed the work's early failure in St. Petersburg (that is, with the critics) to his brother's poor conducting.

The assumed programmatic content of the Fifth Symphony has aroused much speculation. Most analysts are convinced Tchaikowsky had a definite, autobiographical plan in mind. Yet he left no descriptive analysis such as we have of the Fourth Symphony. There he had set out to depict the "inexorableness of fate." One Russian writer discerned "some dark spiritual experience" in the Fifth. "Only at the close," he observed, "the clouds lift, the sky clears, and we see the blue stretching pure and clear beyond." Ernest Newman spoke of the sinister motto theme first announced in the opening movement as "the leaden, deliberate tread of fate." Many have agreed with Newman in classing the Fifth with the Fourth as another "fate" symphony.

Symphony in B minor, No. 6, Opus 74 (*Pathetic*)

First drafts of a sixth symphony—not the *Pathetic*—were made by Tchaikowsky on his return trip from America in the late spring of 1891. Dissatisfied with the way the new score was shaping up, he tore it up and congratulated himself on his "admirable and irrevocable determination" to do so. It is not till February, 1893, that first mention is made of a fresh start on a sixth symphony. "I am now wholly occupied with the new work," he writes excitedly to his brother Anatol. "It is hard for me to tear myself from it. I believe it comes into being as the best of my works. I must finish it as soon as possible, for I have to wind up a lot of affairs...." Subsequent events were to give the last sentence of this letter a sinister note of prophesy. Like Mozart writing the *Requiem Mass* on his deathbed, Tchaikowsky seemed to be defying some unfriendly fate to stop him in the midst of his great symphony.

There was to be a program to this symphony, a mysterious, profoundly personal program. But Tchaikowsky would never tell the world what it was. "Let them guess who can," he challenged. Amid the beautiful natural scenery of Klin, near Moscow, Tchaikowsky worked at his symphony. Curiously enough, his mood was bright and cheerful for a change. Early in October he left for Moscow to attend a funeral. There he met his friend Kashkin and together they talked jovially of life and death. Tchaikowsky was in excellent spirits and Kashkin assured him that he would outlive them all. Tchaikowsky laughed, and talked excitedly about his new symphony, how he was satisfied with the first three movements, how the finale still needed tinkering.

At length he was in St. Petersburg again. The day of the première of his symphony was approaching. Rehearsals were begun and Tchaikowsky soon found reason to grow morose and pessimistic again. He had counted on the musicians reacting warmly to this new music of his, but he began to notice cool faces, indifferent glances, and—horror of horrors—yawns. This was too much for the hypersensitive Tchaikowsky. He felt his hands suddenly become lifeless, his mind lose its alertness. His confidence ebbed from him. To spare the men any further boredom he cut short the rehearsal. Still, he knew he had written his greatest symphony. At the première of October 28th, the audience received the new symphony coolly, and it was not till shortly after Tchaikowsky's death that it began to make a mighty, overpowering impression on listeners wherever it was played.

But the symphony had been baptized without a name. Tchaikowsky felt the term "No. 6" was too bald and lonely a title for it. "Programme Symphony" was also ruled out, for the good reason that he refused to divulge the "program." His brother Modeste suggested "Tragic," but Tchaikowsky rejected that too. When Modeste left him, he went on casting about for a title. In a flash it came to him. He rushed back to his brother. "Peter," he exclaimed; "I have it! Why not call it the 'Pathetic' symphony." Tchaikowsky pounced on the proposal eagerly. "Splendid, Modi, bravo—*Pathetic!*" he shouted. In his brother's presence Tchaikowsky wrote on the score the name by which the symphony has since been known. Most programs, however, give the title in its French form, *Symphonie Pathétique*.

Shortly after the conversation with his brother, Tchaikowsky attended a performance of Ostrowsky's play, *A Warm Heart*. Later he went backstage to pay his respects to the leading actor, Warlamoff. The talk somehow turned to spiritualism, and again Tchaikowsky showed a lighthearted mood. When Warlamoff laughingly ridiculed "these abominations which remind one of death," Tchaikowsky agreed jovially. "There is plenty of time before we have to reckon with this snub-nosed horror. It will not come to snatch us off just yet! *I feel that I shall live a long time!*" Five days later, Peter Ilyitch Tchaikowsky, generally regarded as Russia's greatest composer, was dead, one of the many victims of the fearful cholera epidemic then raging in St. Petersburg.

If Tchaikowsky followed a definite emotional or philosophical program in the *Pathetic* symphony, the key to it died with him. Had he lived, the chances are he would have divulged it, since he was not by nature a secretive, unconfiding man. However, many have probed the symphony's content and concluded it harbored a message of impending death. Yet Kashkin, Tchaikowsky's close friend, interpreted the fierce energy of the third movement and the abysmal sorrow of the Finale "in the broader light of a national or historical significance." He refused to narrow down the scope of the symphony to a merely personal experience.

"If the last movement is intended to be prophetic, it is surely of things vaster and issues more fatal than are contained in a purely personal apprehension of death," he said. "It speaks, rather, of *une lamentation large et souffrance inconnue*—a large lamentation and unknown suffering. It seems to set the seal of finality on all human hopes. Even if we eliminate the merely subjective interest, this autumnal inspiration of Tchaikowsky's, in which we hear the *whirling of the perished leaves of hope*, still remains the most profoundly stirring of his works."

I think we may safely agree with Kashkin's judgment, at the same time reserving the right to read into this monumental dirge, for such it unmistakably is, our own individual sense of its profoundly moving theme of tragic resignation. That Tchaikowsky left it as a testament of disillusion and futility is likely. Yet no one can miss the fine vein of tenderness and the flashes of defiance recurring through it. Few artists have

bequeathed the world such a candid, soul-searing self-portrait.

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- Illustrations shifted to the nearest paragraph break.
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Following remarks have been marked in the text as well:

- Page 8, “Solenelle” changed to “Solennelle”
- Page 13, first name spelled here as “Nadeshka” or “Nadezhka”, elsewhere as “Nadezhda”.
- “Desirée” (Artôt), usually “Désirée” (2x)
- Page 33, “Pathetique” changed to “Pathétique”
- Page 33, “espressive” changed to “espressivo”
- Page 55, “Cosi fan Tutti” kept, but should be “Cosi fan Tutte”
- Page 56-58, “Saint-Saens” kept, but should be “Saint-Saëns” (3 times)

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