

Pittsburgh Symphony Orchestra  
2015-2016 Mellon Grand Classics Season

May 7, 2016

MANFRED MARIA HONECK, CONDUCTOR

PIOTR ILYICH TCHAIKOVSKY    Symphony No. 4 in F minor, Opus 36  
I.    Andante sostenuto  
II.    Andantino in modo di canzona  
III.    Scherzo: Pizzicato ostinato  
IV.    Finale: Allegro con fuoco

Intermission

PIOTR ILYICH TCHAIKOVSKY    Symphony No. 5 in E minor, Opus 64  
I.    Andante — Allegro con anima  
II.    Andante cantabile con alcuna licenza  
III.    Valse: Allegro moderato  
IV.    Finale: Andante maestoso — Allegro vivace

## PROGRAM NOTES BY DR. RICHARD E. RODDA

### PIOTR ILYICH TCHAIKOVSKY

Born 7 May 1840 in Votkinsk, Russia; died 6 November 1893 in St. Petersburg

#### Symphony No. 4 in F minor, Opus 36 (1877-1878)

PREMIERE OF WORK: Moscow, 22 February 1878; Russian Music Society Orchestra; Nikolai Rubinstein, conductor

PSO PREMIERE: 1 November 1900; Carnegie Music Hall; Victor Herbert, conductor

APPROXIMATE DURATION: 45 minutes

INSTRUMENTATION: pairs of woodwinds plus piccolo, four horns, two trumpets, three trombones, tuba, timpani, percussion and strings

The Fourth Symphony was a product of the most crucial and turbulent time of Tchaikovsky's life — 1877, when he met two women who forced him to evaluate himself as he never had before. The first was the sensitive, music-loving widow of a wealthy Russian railroad baron, Nadezhda von Meck, who became not only the financial backer who allowed him to quit his irksome teaching job at the Moscow Conservatory to devote himself entirely to composition, but also the sympathetic sounding-board for reports on the whole range of his activities — emotional, musical, personal. Though they never met, her place in Tchaikovsky's life was enormous and beneficial.

The second woman to enter Tchaikovsky's life in 1877 was Antonina Miliukov, an unnoticed student in one of his large lecture classes at the Conservatory who had worked herself into a passion over her professor. Tchaikovsky paid her no special attention, and had quite forgotten her when he received an ardent love letter professing her flaming and unquenchable desire to meet him. Tchaikovsky (age 37), who should have burned the thing, answered the letter of the 28-year-old Antonina in a polite, cool fashion, but did not include an outright rejection of her advances. He had been considering marriage for almost a year in the hope that it would give him both the stable home life that he had not enjoyed in the twenty years since his mother died, as well as to help dispel the all-too-true rumors of his homosexuality. He believed he might achieve both these goals with Antonina. He could not see the situation clearly enough to realize that what he hoped for was impossible — a pure, platonic marriage without its physical and emotional realities. Further letters from Antonina implored Tchaikovsky to meet her, and threatened suicide out of desperation if he refused. What a welter of emotions must have gripped his heart when, just a few weeks later, he proposed marriage to her! Inevitably, the marriage crumbled within days of the wedding amid Tchaikovsky's searing self-deprecation.

It was during May and June that Tchaikovsky sketched the Fourth Symphony, finishing the first three movements before Antonina began her siege. The finale was completed by the time he proposed. Because of this chronology, the program of the Symphony was not a direct result of his marital disaster. All that — the July wedding, the mere eighteen days of bitter conjugal farce, the two separations — postdated the actual composition of the Symphony by a few months. What Tchaikovsky found in his relationship with this woman (who by 1877 already showed signs of approaching the door of the mental ward in which, still legally married to him, she died in 1917) was a confirmation of his belief in the inexorable workings of Fate in human destiny.

After the premiere, Tchaikovsky explained to Mme. von Meck the emotional content of the Fourth Symphony: "The introduction [blaring brasses heard immediately in a motto theme that recurs throughout the Symphony] is the kernel of the whole Symphony. This is Fate, which hinders one in the pursuit of happiness. There is nothing to do but to submit and vainly complain [the melancholy, syncopated shadow-waltz of the main theme, heard in the strings]. Would it not be better to turn away from reality and lull one's self in dreams? [The second theme is begun by the clarinet.] But no — these are but dreams: roughly we are awakened by Fate. [The blaring brass fanfare over a wave of timpani begins the development section.] Thus we see that life is only an everlasting alternation of somber reality and fugitive dreams of happiness. The second movement shows another phase of sadness. How sad it is that so much has already *been* and *gone*! And yet it is a pleasure to think of the early years. It is sad, yet sweet, to lose one's self in the past. In the third movement are capricious arabesques, vague figures which slip into the imagination when one has taken wine and is slightly intoxicated. Military music is heard in the distance. As to the finale, if you find no pleasure in yourself, go to the people. The picture of a folk holiday. [The finale employs the folk song *A Birch Stood in the Meadow*.] Hardly have we had time

to forget ourselves in the happiness of others when indefatigable Fate reminds us once more of its presence. Yet there still *is* happiness, simple, naive happiness. Rejoice in the happiness of others — and you can still live.”

## Symphony No. 5 in E minor, Opus 64 (1888)

PREMIERE OF WORK: St. Petersburg, 17 November 1888; Russian Music Society Orchestra; Piotr Ilych Tchaikovsky, conductor

PSO PREMIERE: 3 November 1898; Carnegie Music Hall; Victor Herbert, conductor

APPROXIMATE DURATION: 47 minutes

INSTRUMENTATION: woodwinds in pairs plus piccolo, four horns, two trumpets, three trombones, tuba, timpani and strings

Tchaikovsky was never able to maintain his self-confidence for long, and his opinion of a new work frequently fluctuated between the extremes of satisfaction and denigration. The unjustly neglected *Manfred Symphony* of 1885, for example, left his pen as “the best I have ever written,” but the work failed to make a good impression at its premiere, and Tchaikovsky’s estimation of it tumbled. The lack of success of *Manfred* was particularly painful because he had not produced a major orchestral work since the Violin Concerto of 1878, and the score’s failure left him with the gnawing worry that he might be “written out.” The three years after *Manfred* were devoid of creative work.

It was not until May 1888 that Tchaikovsky again took up the challenge of the blank page. On May 27th he wrote to his brother Modeste, “To speak frankly, I feel as yet no impulse for creative work. What does this mean? Have I written myself out? No ideas, no inclination! Still, I am hoping to collect, little by little, material for a symphony.” Though he was unusually secretive about the progress of this new piece, he must have begun it as soon as this letter was written, since the sketch of the complete score was finished just six weeks later. “I am exceedingly anxious to prove to myself, as to others,” he wrote to his benefactress, Nazedha von Meck, “that I am not played out as a composer.” He worked doggedly on the symphony, ignoring illness, the premature encroachment of old age (he was only 48, but suffered from continual exhaustion and loss of vision), and his troubling self-doubts, and when it was completed, by the end of August, he allowed, “I have not blundered; it has turned out well.”

Tchaikovsky’s satisfaction was soon mitigated, however, by the work’s premiere in St. Petersburg on November 17, 1888. Though the Fifth Symphony was applauded by the public, he felt that it was a failure, that the ovation was for his earlier pieces rather than for this new one, and that the whole affair was cause for “a deep dissatisfaction with myself.” Modeste was convinced that any negative reaction to the Fifth Symphony — and the critics had some — could be traced to an inadequate performance, but Tchaikovsky could not be persuaded of the work’s value until a performance in Hamburg early in 1889, when musicians, critics and audience alike received it enthusiastically. Even the venerable Johannes Brahms, who was not strongly drawn to the music of his Russian colleague, made a special effort to attend the performance on a visit to his hometown. Tchaikovsky was buoyed by his reception in Hamburg, and his estimation of the Fifth Symphony (and of himself) shot up once again. The work has remained among the staples of the concert repertory.

Tchaikovsky never gave any indication that the Symphony No. 5, unlike the Fourth Symphony, had a program, though he may well have had one in mind. Years after its composition, some rough sketches that apparently refer to the Symphony No. 5 were discovered in his notebooks: “Introduction. Complete resignation before Fate, or, which is the same, before the inscrutable predestination of Providence. Allegro (1) Murmurs, doubts, complaints against XXX. (2) Shall I throw myself into the embrace of faith???” The “XXX” probably referred to Tchaikovsky’s homosexuality, the only matter he concealed behind secret signs in his notes and diary. If that is so, the Fifth Symphony represents Tchaikovsky’s resignation to his fate in the way he could best command — music. The workings of fate were an obsessive theme with him, and the program of the earlier Fourth Symphony portrays man’s happiness crushed by that intractable power at every turn. In their biography of the composer, Lawrence and Elisabeth Hanson reckoned Tchaikovsky’s view of fate as the motivating force in the Symphony No. 5, though they distinguished its interpretation from that in the Fourth Symphony. “In the Fourth Symphony,” the Hansons wrote, “the Fate theme is earthy and militant, as if the composer visualizes the implacable enemy in the form, say, of a Greek god. In the Fifth, the majestic Fate theme has been elevated far above earth, and man is seen, not as fighting a force that thinks on its own terms, of revenge, hate or spite, but as a wholly spiritual power which subjects him to checks and agonies for the betterment of his soul.”

The structure of the Fifth Symphony reflects this process of “betterment.” It progresses from minor to major, from darkness to light, from melancholy to joy — or at least to acceptance and stoic resignation. It is the same path Beethoven blazed in his Fifth Symphony, and the power of such a musico-philosophical construction was not lost on Tchaikovsky, or on any other 19th-century musician. The sense of a perilous obstacle surmounted through struggle energizes both works, and is the substance of any “message” that Tchaikovsky may have embedded in this Symphony.

The Symphony’s four movements are linked together through the use of a recurring “Fate” motto theme, given immediately at the beginning by unison clarinets as the brooding introduction to the first movement. The sonata form proper starts with a melancholy melody intoned by bassoon and clarinet over a stark string accompaniment. The woodwinds enter with wave-form scale patterns followed by a stentorian passage for the brass that leads to a climax. Several themes are presented to round out the exposition: a romantic tune, filled with emotional swells, for the strings; an aggressive strain given as a dialogue between winds and strings; and a languorous, sighing string melody. Again, the brasses are brought forth to climax this section. All of the themes are treated in the development section. The solo bassoon ushers in the recapitulation, and the themes from the exposition are heard again, though with changes of key and instrumentation. After a final climax in the coda, the movement fades, softer and slower, and sinks, finally, into the lowest reaches of the orchestra.

At the head of the manuscript of the second movement Tchaikovsky is said to have written, “Oh, how I love ... if you love me ...,” a sentiment that calls to mind an operatic love scene. (Tchaikovsky, it should be remembered, was a master of the musical stage who composed more operas than he did symphonies.) The expressiveness of the opening theme, hauntingly played by the solo horn, is heightened as the movement proceeds through enriched contrapuntal lines and instrumental sonorities. Twice, the imperious Fate motto intrudes upon the starlit mood of this *romanza*.

If the second movement derives from opera, the third grows from ballet. A flowing waltz melody (inspired by a street song Tchaikovsky had heard in Italy a decade earlier) dominates much of the movement. The central trio section exhibits a scurrying figure in the strings which shows the influence of Léo Delibes, the French master of ballet music whom Tchaikovsky deeply admired. Quietly and briefly, the Fate motto returns in the movement’s closing pages.

The finale begins with a long introduction based on the Fate theme cast in a heroic rather than a sinister or melancholy mood. A vigorous exposition, a concentrated development and an intense recapitulation follow. The long coda uses the motto theme in a major-key, victory-won setting. This stirring work ends with a final statement from the trumpets and horns, and closing chords from the full orchestra.

The Hansons characterized Tchaikovsky’s Fifth Symphony in the following manner: “The Fifth Symphony is splendid music, grand and dignified, and its form expresses the content more satisfactorily than in any other of Tchaikovsky’s large works for orchestra. But the final thought must be, as with so many of this composer’s works, a thought transcending the obvious pleasure of tunefulness, superb orchestration, and passionate self-questioning; it is from first note to last noble. Never querulous, never playing to the gallery, it exposes the soul of a man which all must feel the better for knowing.”