

Symphony No. 4 in F minor, Op. 36

PIOTR ILYICH TCHAIKOVSKY

B. May 7, 1840, Kamsko-Votkinsk, Russia

D. November 6, 1893, St. Petersburg, Russia

Premiered by the Russian Musical Society under the direction of Nikolai Rubinstein in February 1868.

Scored for piccolo, two flutes, two oboes, two B-flat clarinets, two bassoons, four horns, two trumpets, three trombones, tuba, timpani, triangle, cymbals, bass drum and strings (approx. 44 minutes).

“I adore terribly this child of mine; it is one of only a few works with which I have not experienced disappointment...this is my best symphonic work” - so spoke Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky regarding his monumental Fourth Symphony. Considering the circumstances surrounding the inspiration for the work, though, it is surprising Tchaikovsky felt such affection.

By the time Tchaikovsky began writing his Fourth Symphony in 1877, he had exchanged vows with Antonina Milyukova, a young Russian conservatory student. This is somewhat perplexing considering Tchaikovsky's supposed homosexuality. Whatever the reason for the union - perhaps a chance to silence innuendos regarding his sexual orientation - it dissolved within a year. During his marriage, however, one of Tchaikovsky's most triumphant works was written - a tribute to his beliefs regarding musical creation. In a letter to his patroness and friend, Madame Nadezhda von Meck, Tchaikovsky muses:

At the moment of creation the artist needs complete quiet. The artist's work, even that of the musician, is always objective. Those are mistaken who think that the creative artist can express his feelings through his artistic medium while he is experiencing them. Sad as well as joyous feelings are always expressed, as it were, in retrospect.... In short, the artist leads two lives: that of the ordinary human being and that of the artist; and these two lives do not always run parallel.

Tchaikovsky's friendship with Mme. von Meck seems to have played just as critical a role in the genesis of the symphony as his faltering marriage. He dedicated the work to “my dearest friend” - a reference to von Meck - and at times referred to the piece as “our symphony.”

Musically, Tchaikovsky's Fourth Symphony hinges on a recurring “Fate” motive - recalling the opening theme of Beethoven's Fifth Symphony. The massively complex first movement (*Andante sostenuto—Moderato con anima*) opens with the “Fate” motive, a fanfare sounded first by the horns and bassoons and then by the trumpets. From this moment forward, the movement never ceases to develop, presenting new themes and continually contorting around the omnipresent “Fate” motive.

The second movement (*Andantino in modo di canzona*) presents an entirely new aspect of sadness – melancholy - as the plaintive solo oboe presents the first of two themes. The initially subdued second theme rises from the clarinet and bassoon to reach shimmering heights in the strings, only to return once more to the oboe theme, which is now passed throughout the orchestra.

The playful third movement - a *scherzo* - seems almost out of place with its piquant pizzicati and colorful wind trio, complete with frenzied piccolo outbursts.

The *Finale: Allegro con fuoco* once again confronts Tchaikovsky's "Fate" motive, this time with more determined success. The initial theme, based on the Russian folk song "In the field a little Birch Tree stood," escalates and morphs into the fanfare. But Tchaikovsky chooses to overcome "Fate" and the music triumphs over oppression, as the symphony sprints to a cacophonous close.

Although Tchaikovsky never published a program associated with the Fourth Symphony, he did include a detailed programmatic description of the work in a letter to von Meck:

I. The introduction is the kernel, the quintessence, the chief thought of the whole work. The main idea, first heard in the trumpets and then in the horns, is Fate, the inexorable power that hampers our search for happiness.... The main theme of the Allegro describes feelings of depression and haplessness. Would it not be better to forsake reality and lose oneself in dream?... A sweet and tender dream enfolds me, a serene and radiant presence leads me on, until all that was dark and joyless is forgotten.... But no, these are but dreams. Fate returns to waken us, and we see that life is an alternation of grim reality and fugitive dreams of happiness.

II. The second movement shows another aspect of sadness. Here is the melancholy feeling that overcomes us when we sit weary and alone at the end of the day. The book we pick up slips from our fingers, and a procession of memories passes by in review. We remember happy times of youth as well as moments of sorrow. We regret what is past, but have neither the courage nor the will to begin a new life.... There is a bittersweet comfort in losing oneself in the past....

III. Here are only the capricious arabesques and indeterminate shapes that come into one's mind with a little wine. The mood is neither sad nor gay.... One may envision a drunken peasant singing a street song, or hear a military band passing in the distance. These are disconnected pictures... with no connection to reality.

IV. If you find no joy in yourself, look around you. Go to the people: See how they can enjoy life and give themselves up to festivity. But hardly have we had a moment to enjoy this when Fate, relentless and untiring, makes his presence known. In their revelry, the others take

no notice.... There is still happiness, simple and naive; rejoice in the happiness of others and you can still live.

The Detroit Symphony Orchestra last performed Tchaikovsky's Symphony No. 4 on August 5, 2006 at Meadow Brook Music Festival with Edwin Outwater.

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Tchaikovsky, Symphony No. 4, Daniele Gatti conducting the Royal Philharmonic Orchestra, Harmonia Mundi 907393.

Program note by Michael Mauskopf, doctorate student at the University of Michigan, School of Music, Theatre & Dance.