

**Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky: Symphony No. 4**  
**Pure Melodrama?**  
**Perusal script**

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NARRATOR

In the late 19<sup>th</sup> century,

Western music critics...had things to say about Tchaikovsky...

ACTOR

*(this can be split between actor and narrator as a comic dialogue)*

*[A quick-fire babble of different characters, and pronouncing the absurd error]*

Evidently a Slavonic genius... scarcely European at all...

and with that unmistakably Slavonic temperament...

*[Triumphant, astonished and energetic]*

Fiery, huge and fantastic!

*[Baffled and disapproving]*

Languid!

*[Naughty and full of relish]*

Gorgeous!

*[Full of moral disapproval]*

Monotonous and oriental!

No restraint, no fear of excess...

Everything is exaggerated and quite unnatural...

He lacks nobility...

A confessed voluptuary...

*[Outraged and bewildered, like an exclamation]*

This music is full of of supernatural episodes...

completely unmotivated and produced by a glaringly obvious machinery...

*[Urgently arguing the other side]*

There are entertaining passages of romance and revelry...

*[Outraged again]*

From the symphonic point of view, these are the purest humbug...

*[As though conciliating]*

The symphony's notablest merit is its freedom from frightful effeminacy...

*[Absolutely outraged]*

But there is no depth...

This composer has the singular power of being tragic, momentous, and romantic...

about nothing at all...

**ME 1                      Movement 1, Bars 1-13: 36"**

NARRATOR

First of March, 1878... Florence, Italy...

Tchaikovsky... to Nadezhda von Meck... his patron... whom he has never met...

ACTOR

Precious Nadyezhda Filaretovna! *[Nad-Yezh-da Fila-Ret-ovna]*

Your letter gave me such joy...

How happy I am you liked our symphony... that it entered your heart...

that you experienced what I felt...

You ask whether it has a program... a meaning...

It does... but I can tell that only to you... and only in a general way...

The beginning is the seed of everything...

This is... FATE...

hanging above us like the sword of Damocles...

and poisoning the soul...

NARRATOR

Goethe... Pushkin... Berlioz... Byron...

So many Romantics were haunted by this idea...

ACTOR

...the deaf tyranny of Fate,

The ruling principle of Hate

Which for its pleasure doth create

The things it may annihilate...

NARRATOR

This was a time of terrifying change... and revolutions...

And new discoveries in science, shattering the old ways of explaining things...

'Fate'... was a way to dramatize what we cannot understand...

ACTOR

The Force of Destiny!

**ME 2**

**Verdi Forza overture, Bars 1-7: 7”**

NARRATOR

Only months before beginning his Fourth Symphony...

Tchaikovsky was swept away by a new French opera...

ACTOR

Bizet's 'Carmen' is a masterpiece! And what a subject!...

I cannot play the final scene without weeping...

On the one hand, the coarse gaiety of the common crowd  
enjoying themselves at a bullfight...

On the other, the tragedy of the central characters...  
driven... by Fate... to inescapable destruction!

**ME 3**

**Bizet Carmen prelude – 2<sup>nd</sup> section – Andante moderato  
Bars 1-4: 8”**

NARRATOR

To 19<sup>th</sup> century music-lovers, 'Fate' meant... above all...

the opening of Beethoven's Fifth symphony...

which the composer himself – according to a most unreliable witness –  
called...

ACTOR

Fate... knocking at the door!

**ME 4**                      **Beethoven Sym. 5 – movement 1, 1<sup>st</sup> 4 notes Bars 1-2: 3”**

ACTOR [*proudly*]

My Fourth Symphony imitates Beethoven’s Fifth...

But not its music... its idea...

**ME 5**                      **Mvt 1, Bars 1-3 (to 2<sup>nd</sup> beat): 8”**

NARRATOR

Tchaikovsky was essentially... a dramatic composer...

Even in symphonies... he thought theatrically...

In those days, theater was above all melodrama...

a style of shocks and exaggeration...

that grew up with the invention of new technologies...

Footlights... spotlights... gas, limelight and electricity...

Emotion could now be heightened by bright lights...

and dark shadows...

And to make these shadows more ‘dramatic’, actors leaned ...

bent at the diagonal ... stretched out their arms...

and dragged their cloaks behind them...

In this new-style theater, everything reflected these ‘diagonals’...

acting... scenery... costumes... and the music...

**ME 6**                      **Mvt 1, Bar 4 to bar 7: 8”**

NARRATOR

Melodrama is about the strongest contrasts...

darkness and light... hope and despair...

corruption and innocence... crime and punishment...

and in music...

thunder... and the sweetness of a simple melody...

**ME 7**                      **Mvt 1, Bars 21-3: 11"**

NARRATOR

These were signs... that everybody recognized...

The horncalls of an unknown fate... marching armies...

longing and despair...

and the falling semitone that represented... tears...

**ME 8**                      **Mvt 1, Bars 24-26: 10"**

NARRATOR

Archetypal situations were reenacted endlessly...

shipwrecks... nocturnal terrors in the graveyard...

the abandoned prisoner in the dungeon...

and the brilliant and crowded ballroom in the palace...

Russians found these ballroom scenes especially significant...

For at these high-society gatherings... in St Petersburg and Moscow...

young men and women of the ruling classes met each other...

From Tolstoy's 'War and Peace'...

ACTOR [urgently]

Natasha was going to the first grand ball of her life.

She had gotten up at eight in the morning and spent the day in feverish anxiety...

In the cold darkness of the carriage, she imagined what awaited her...

Brightly lit rooms, music, flowers, dancing...

all the gilded youth of Petersburg... the Emperor...

The noise was deafening, light and brilliance dazzled her...

Stairway mirrors reflected gorgeous dresses,  
diamonds and pearls on naked arms and necks...

She stood, her own thin arms lowered, her barely defined bosom rising rhythmically,  
holding her breath...

Her shining, frightened eyes looked straight ahead, ready for the greatest  
happiness...

or the greatest sorrow...

From the gallery came the sounds and rhythm... of a waltz'...

**ME 9**

**Mvt 1, Bars 27-35: 27"**

NARRATOR

Not just a pretty picture, but a moment in a drama...

Tolstoy uses glittering visual imagery...

Tchaikovsky... a confusion of three waltzes simultaneously...

A quick one...

**ME 10**                    **3/8 waltz, Score: 6"**

A medium one...

**ME 11**                    **3/4 waltz, Score: 5"**

And a slow one...

**ME 12**                    **9/8 waltz, Score: 12"**

NARRATOR

The Romantic ballroom was a place not just of pleasure... but of anxiety...

The waltz was provocative... the only dance where...

a man could publicly place his hand upon the body of a girl...

At such a moment, either might discover the love of their life...

or the destroyer of their soul...

ACTOR

Natasha's desperate, rapt face caught Prince Andrei's eye....

He suggested a turn of the waltz...

Ready for despair and ecstasy, she lit up with a grateful, childlike smile....



She was in that highest state of happiness when a person becomes...  
perfectly kind and good...  
and cannot believe... in evil, unhappiness and grief...

**ME 13**                    **Mvt 1, Bars 70-86 (downbeat only): 39”**

NARRATOR

In melodrama... when emotions overflowed...  
characters lost the power of speech... stuttered... gasped...  
Their hearts beat wildly...

ACTOR            [*urgently*]

Natasha’s eyes looked everywhere at once: she saw nothing clearly,  
her pulse beat a hundred times a minute, the blood throbbed in her heart...

**ME 14**                    **Mvt 1, Bar 86 to bar 91: 15”**

ACTOR            [*proudly*]

You criticize me for composing in this way...  
But I would not wish symphonic works to come from my pen expressing nothing...  
and consisting of empty play with chords, rhythms and modulations...  
There is not a note here which I did not feel...

**ME 15**                    **Mvt 1, Bar 91 to bar 103: 30”**

ACTOR    [*continuing the previous thought*]

You say my symphony is programmatic,...

I cannot imagine why you consider this a defect...

Of course it has a program, but not one that can be formulated in words...

A symphony should express everything for which there are no words...

NARRATOR

Nonetheless... writing to his patron, who was paying for this music...

Tchaikovsky tried to find words... to explain what happens next...

ACTOR

Suddenly... amid this bleak and hopeless reality...

there appears a sweet and gentle daydream...

NARRATOR

Still a waltz... but different...

**ME 16**                      **Mvt 1, Bar 115 to bar 121: 22”**

NARRATOR

A new melody... A new character emerges from the swirl of dancers...

**ME 17**                      **Mvt 1, Bar 121 to bar 127: 27”**

ACTOR

A blissful, radiant human image hurries by and beckons you away...

Everything gloomy and joyless is now forgotten...

Daydreams envelop the soul completely...

**ME 18**

**Mvt 1, Bar 133 to bar 135: 10”**

ACTOR

There she is! There she is! My happiness!

**ME 19**

**Mvt 1, Bar 135 to bar 137: 9”**

NARRATOR

This was a common image of the time...

an unknown girl...

glimpsed for a moment through the busy hubbub of a high society ball...

Just after finishing this symphony, Tchaikovsky wrote this song...

*[a distant recording of this song underneath what follows]*

ACTOR *[wait for the music to be heard, then push on]*

Amidst the noise of the ball,

In the swirl of the crowd,

I saw you.

Your face was mysterious,

Your eyes shone with sadness,

Your voice was as clear as a faraway flute,

Or a wave on the sea.

Now when I lie awake at night,

I know... I love you...

**ME 20**                    **Mvt 1, Bar 147 to bar 201: 2'07"**

ACTOR            [*forcefully*]

No! It was only a dream...

And Fate has awoken you...

tearing you from the peace and happiness you long for...

NARRATOR

In his private life, Tchaikovsky was homosexual...

But recently... he'd begun thinking he should find himself a woman he could marry...

ACTOR

I live a selfish life...

I work for myself, look after myself, strive only for my own well-being...

This is a calm and productive way to live... but also dry and dead and narrow...

**ME 21**                    **Mvt 1, Bar 201 to bar 206: 14"**

ACTOR

May 1st, 1877...

I am nervous and irritable, and my symphony progresses with difficulty...

Nonetheless, three movements are complete... and I've started the finale...

NARRATOR

At this moment, Fate... really... intervened...

Tchaikovsky received a love letter... from a young music student he barely knew...

Antonina Milyukova...

**ME 22**                    **Mvt 1, Bar 215 to bar 221: 18”**

ACTOR

She wrote so genuinely and warmly, that I answered...

something I'd always avoided before...

And although I offered her no hope of returning her feelings...

We began to correspond ...

NARRATOR

The result was a disaster...

A crisis of a kind he'd only recently imagined in his symphony...

**ME 23**                    **Mvt 1, Bar 246 to bar 283: 1'39”**

ACTOR

Why did I do this?

It seemed that Fate had driven me towards this girl...

I told her I could feel nothing for her... except sympathy...

But her reply convinced me I had a simple choice...

I could preserve my freedom at the price of this girl's death...

or I could marry her, although I did not love her...

**ME 24**                    **Mvt 1, Bar 284 to bar 291: 21”**

ACTOR

I had lived 37 years with an aversion to marriage... and now I had to change my life...

To get accustomed to this future, I went off to the country for a month...

**ME 25**                    **Mvt 1, Bar 299 to bar 303 – Horns only: 15”**

ACTOR

The quietness of country life... had a wholesome effect on me...

I decided not to escape my destiny... and my fateful encounter with this girl...

**ME 26**                    **Mvt 1, Bar 355 to bar 372: 42”**

NARRATOR

In July, Tchaikovsky made the long journey back to Moscow...

ACTOR

In a day or two, my marriage to this woman will take place...

What happens afterwards, I do not know...

I am marrying without love,

because circumstances have made it impossible to do otherwise...

**ME 27**                    **Mvt 1, Bar 381 (2<sup>nd</sup> time) to bar 402: 33”**

NARRATOR

No-one knows exactly why Tchaikovsky took this step...

But one reason might have been that,

as he was finishing this Fourth Symphony in the month of May...

he was engulfed by an idea for a new opera,

on the most beloved tale in all of Russian literature...

Pushkin's 'Eugene Onegin'...

In that poem, catastrophe takes place...

when a young girl declares her love to an older man she barely knows...

and he rejects her...

Tchaikovsky chose to do the opposite....

**ME 28**

**Mvt 1, Bar 402 to bar 411: 16"**

ACTOR

Tolichka, yesterday was the most painful day of all...

It seemed my life was broken for ever... and I suffered unutterable despair...

Without my love for you and those close to me, it would have ended very badly...

NARRATOR

Tchaikovsky...writing to his brother... only days after he had married...

In the words of the hero of his new opera...

ACTOR

Shame!... Despair!... What a miserable fate is mine!

**ME 29**                      **Mvt 1, Bar 411 to end of movement: 19”**

NARRATOR

Art as prophecy...

An idea possessing many Russians at this time...

Musorgsky... Dostoyevsky... and romantic painters like Repin and Surikov...

who made terrifying images of the Russian past...

to warn of what might become the Russian future...

And when prophecies come true, decisions must be made...

Faced with this astonishing concatenation between imagination and his life...

Tchaikovsky did as the second movement of his symphony ordained...

He retreated to the countryside....

ACTOR

I cannot imagine living anywhere other than in the Russian countryside...

Words cannot express how intensely I feel the beauty of this landscape...

and the quiet... which I need more than anything...

NARRATOR

The sound of plucked strings like an ancient village lute or a lyre...

**ME 30**                      **Mvt 2, Bars 2-5 - Strings only : 8”**



NARRATOR

Floating above, a solitary song...

The oboe suggests the nasal melancholy of a peasant instrument...

**ME 31**                    **Mvt 2, Bar 1 to bar 21 tutti: 41”**

NARRATOR

Tchaikovsky could have had in mind a Russian folk-tune...

like this bride's lament... from a village wedding...

RE (Recorded example): Wedding lament: 14” approx

NARRATOR

But he could have been thinking of music neither folk nor Russian... Schumann...

**ME 32**                    **Schumann Erste Verlusst , Manuscript score: 15”**

NARRATOR

There are other secrets here...

**ME 33**                    **Mvt 2 Bar 1 to bar 2 – Oboe only, SLOWLY: 3”**

NARRATOR

Those opening notes... recall the first movement... and the waltz...

**ME 34**                    **Mvt 1, Bar 27 to bar 29: 5”**

NARRATOR

We hear an echo of the romantic ballroom from the city...  
in the endless Russian landscape...

**ME 35**                    **Mvt 2, Bar 41 to bar 49: 18”**

NARRATOR

New rhythms... more country dance than waltzes for the aristocracy...

**ME 36**                    **Mvt 2, Bar 50 to bar 51 (downbeat): 3”**

NARRATOR

Soon we hear scraps of other things we've heard before... the Fate motif...

ACTOR

The seed of everything that follows!

**ME 37**                    **Mvt 2, Bar 53 to bar 75: 35”**

NARRATOR

New rhythms produce new melodies... a swaying harvest song...

Tolstoy's 'Anna Karenina' was finished in the same year as this symphony...

ACTOR

The longer Levin mowed the field, the more he felt those moments of oblivion...  
when his arms no longer swung the scythe...  
but the scythe itself gave motion to his body...

**ME 38**                      **Mvt 2, Bars 126-133: 12”**

NARRATOR

Again... the past is not forgotten...

**ME 39**                      **Mvt 1, Example 34 repeated: 5”**

NARRATOR

As in a nightmare...  
the village dance erupts with memories of the ballroom waltz...  
and trumpets warning us of Fate...

**ME 40**                      **Mvt 2, Bar 150 to bar 173 (end of bar): 53”**

NARRATOR

In the first movement, the composer was lulled into the sweetness of a dream...  
which he called ‘fantasies’...

**ME 41**                      **Mvt 1, Bar 115 to bar 118 – Woodwind only: 11”**

NARRATOR

In the countryside... those same ‘fantasies’ become the sound of birds...

Tolstoy again:

ACTOR

The sun was setting behind the forest,  
and in its light the little birches... scattered among the aspens...  
were distinctly outlined with hanging branches and buds swollen to bursting...  
From a thicket where the snow still lay...  
came the sound of water, trickling in narrow, winding streams...  
Small birds chirped and flew from tree to tree...

**ME 42**                      **Mvt 2, Bar 199 to bar 207 (downbeat only): 42”**

NARRATOR

Tchaikovsky knew what Tolstoy was writing about...

ACTOR

In summertime...  
I lay on the earth exhausted, drinking in my love of nature...  
reeling from the sweet intoxicating sensations induced in me  
by woods and land and river,  
the village in the distance,  
the simple little church...  
In a word, everything that constitutes the melancholy Russian landscape....