Peter Tchaikovsky
Born May 7, 1840, Viatka, Russia.
Died November 18, 1893, Saint Petersburg, Russia.

Symphony No. 4 in F Minor, Op. 36

Tchaikovsky began this symphony in May 1877 and completed it on January 19, 1878. The first performance was given in Moscow on March 4, 1878. The score calls for two flutes and piccolo, two oboes, two clarinets, two bassoons, four horns, two trumpets, three trombones and tuba, timpani, triangle, cymbals, bass drum, and strings. Performance time is approximately forty-four minutes.

The Chicago Symphony Orchestra’s first subscription concert performances of Tchaikovsky’s Fourth Symphony were given at the Auditorium Theatre on November 3 and 4, 1899, with Theodore Thomas conducting. Our most recent subscription concert performance was given at Orchestra Hall on November 10, 2006, with Ludovic Morlot conducting. The Orchestra first performed this symphony at the Ravinia Festival on July 17, 1936, with Willem van Hoogstraten conducting, and most recently on July 31, 1999, with Christoph Eschenbach conducting.


Tchaikovsky was at work on his Fourth Symphony when he received a letter from Antonina Milyukova claiming to be a former student of his and declaring that she was madly in love with him. Tchaikovsky had just read Pushkin’s Eugene Onegin, hoping to find an opera subject, and he saw fateful parallels between Antonina and Pushkin’s heroine, Tatiana. Perhaps Tchaikovsky confused art and life; in any event, the consequences were dire. It is hard to say which letter provoked the stronger response from Tchaikovsky—the despairing letter Tatiana writes to the cold-hearted Onegin, or the one he himself received from Antonina, threatening suicide. The first inspired one of the great scenes in opera; the latter precipitated a painful and disastrous marriage.

We have since learned enough about Tchaikovsky, and about the agony of repressed homosexuality, to understand why he would choose to marry a woman he didn’t even know as a kind of cover. (Less than a year earlier, Tchaikovsky had begun an extraordinary relationship, conducted exclusively by correspondence, with Nadezhda von Meck, and he delighted in the combination of intellectual intimacy and physical distance.) On June 1, 1877, Tchaikovsky stopped work on the first three movements of this symphony and visited Antonina Milyukova for the first time. A day or two later he proposed.

He didn’t tell Nadezhda von Meck of his plans until three days before the wedding. In that letter he confessed that he had “lived thirty-seven years with an innate aversion to marriage. . . . In a day or two my marriage will take place,” he wrote in closing. “What will happen after that I do not know.” Tchaikovsky quickly learned that, in addition to the obvious strain of living with someone to whom he felt profound physical aversion, he would grow to disdain Antonina, particularly after the stunning discovery that she knew not one note of music. “My heart is full,” he wrote to von Meck. “It thirsts to pour itself out in music.”

It was music that kept him going. When he was able to escape, temporarily, to Kamenka, he found solace in his fourth symphony and by working intermittently on Eugene Onegin. He returned to Moscow in late September, barely in time to begin the fall term at the conservatory, and discovered, surely without surprise, that he could maintain the facade no longer. Many years later, he confessed that he waded into
the Moscow River, hoping to contract a fatal chill, and stood with the icy water up to his waist until he could, literally, stand no more. He then fled to Saint Petersburg, where a psychiatrist prescribed a complete change of scenery and a permanent separation from Antonina. Nicolai Rubinstein and Tchaikovsky's brother Anatoly rushed to Moscow to tell Antonina. She listened calmly and served them tea.

Tchaikovsky's marriage lasted less than three months. On October 13, Anatoly took Tchaikovsky to Switzerland, then on to Paris and Italy. Tchaikovsky asked that the unfinished manuscript of the Fourth Symphony be sent from Moscow and he completed the scoring in January 1878. He finished Eugene Onegin the following month. That March he sketched the violin concerto in just eleven days. When he returned to Russia in late April, his problems with Antonina were still unresolved—she first accepted and then rejected the divorce papers, and later extracted her final revenge by moving into the apartment above his—but the worst year of his life was over.

The temptation to read a program into Tchaikovsky's Fourth Symphony is as old as the work itself. Since Nadezhda von Meck allowed Tchaikovsky to dedicate the symphony to her (without mentioning her name) and was contributing generously to support his career, she demanded to know what the work was about. Tchaikovsky's response, often quoted, is a detailed account, filled with emotional thoughts and empty phrases—words written after the fact to satisfy an indispensable patron. When Tchaikovsky mentions fate, however, his words ring true; this was a subject that had haunted him since 1876, when he saw Carmen and was struck by the "death of the two principals who, through fate, fatum, ultimately reach the peak of their suffering and their inescapable end." He wrote to Nadezhda von Meck:

The introduction is the seed of the whole symphony, undoubtedly the main idea. This is fate, that fatal force which prevents the impulse to happiness from attaining its goal, which jealously ensures that peace and happiness shall not be complete and unclouded, which hangs above your head like the sword of Damocles, and unwaveringly, constantly poisons the soul.

Indeed, the icy blast from the horns that opens this symphony returns repeatedly in the first movement (and once in the finale), each time wiping out everything in its path. It's like the celebrated fate motive from Beethoven's Fifth Symphony—the one the composer himself compared to fate knocking at the door—except that it's more of a disruption than a compositional device. Later, Tchaikovsky wrote to the composer Sergei Taneyev, a former student:

Of course my symphony is programmatic, but this program is such that it cannot be formulated in words. That would excite ridicule and appear comic. Ought not a symphony—that is, the most lyrical of all forms—to be such a work? Should it not express everything for which there are no words, but which the soul wishes to express, and which requires to be expressed? . . . Please do not think that I aspire to paint before you a depth and grandeur of thought that cannot be easily understood in words. I was not trying to express any new thought. In essence my symphony imitates Beethoven's Fifth; that is, I was not imitating its musical thoughts, but the fundamental idea. Do you think there is a program in the Fifth Symphony? Not only is there a program, but in this instance there cannot be any question about its efforts to express itself. My symphony rests upon a foundation that is nearly the same, and if you haven't understood me, it follows only that I am not a Beethoven, a fact which I have never doubted.

Taneyev was perhaps the first to question the preponderance of what he called ballet music in the symphony. In fact, the lilting main theme of the opening movement (marked "in movimento di valse") and the whole of the two inner movements—the slow pas de deux with its mournful oboe solo, and the brilliant and playful pizzicato scherzo—remind us that the best of Tchaikovsky's ballet scores are symphonic in scope and tone. Tchaikovsky was angered by the comment and asked Taneyev if he considered as ballet music "every cheerful tune that has a dance rhythm? If that's the case," he concluded, "you must also be unable to reconcile yourself to the majority of Beethoven's symphonies in which you encounter such things at every turn." The finale is more complex, emotionally and musically, swinging from the dark emotions of the first movement to a more festive mood. "If you cannot discover reasons for happiness in
yourself," Tchaikovsky wrote to Mme von Meck, "look at others. Get out among the people. Look what a good time they have simply surrendering themselves to joy." There is one final intrusion of the fateful horns from the symphony's opening, but this time the music quickly recovers, rousing itself to a defiantly triumphant and heroic Beethovenian ending, in intention if not in substance.

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