

## Pyotr Il'yich TCHAIKOVSKY (1840-1893)

Symphony No. 4 in F Minor, Op. 36 [1877-78]

- I Andante sostenuto - Moderato con anima - Moderato assai, quasi Andante - Allegro vivo
- II Andantino in modo di canzone
- III Scherzo. Pizzicato ostinato - Allegro
- IV Finale. Allegro con fuoco

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A traumatic time for Tchaikovsky personally, 1877-78 was nevertheless one of his most fruitful compositional periods. His ill-fated marriage to Antonina Ivanovna Milyukova in July 1877 lasted only two months. It was no secret to Antonina that Tchaikovsky was a homosexual but apart from that they had little in common and spent most of their marriage apart. Tchaikovsky attempted suicide by trying to catch pneumonia standing in an icy river and his doctor ordered that he separate from Antonina.

Although he warned people against reading too much into his music, Tchaikovsky's major works from this period - his opera Eugene Onegin, concerned with the perils of emotional candour, and the Fourth Symphony - seem to have been affected by this traumatic event. The symphony was dedicated to his 'best friend' and patron Nadezha von Meck, a wealthy widow with whom Tchaikovsky corresponded for 14 years (although they never met). Its much-discussed program, written retrospectively to pacify von Meck, describes the struggles of life, some of which can be heard in the music.

The opening movement begins with horns announcing the 'fate' theme, 'that fatal force which prevents the impulse to happiness from attaining its goal...which hangs above your head like the sword of Damocles.' Comparisons to Beethoven's 'fate' motive from the opening of his Fifth Symphony have been made. Tchaikovsky noted to his student Sergei Taneyev that 'in essence my symphony imitates Beethoven's Fifth; that is, I was not imitating its musical thoughts, but the fundamental [fate] idea.'

The second movement can be heard as a nostalgic reflection on life. As Tchaikovsky wrote to von Meck, 'How sad to think that so much has been, so much is gone! We regret the past, yet we have neither the courage nor the desire to begin life afresh. We are weary of existence.'

The scherzo is unique in that the string section plays entirely pizzicato. 'Suddenly arises the memory of a drunken peasant and a ribald song, and military music in the distance. Such disconnected images flit through the brain as one sinks into a tipsy slumber. They have nothing to do with reality; they are incomprehensible, bizarre and fragmentary.'

The balletic opening to the finale promises a more joyful outlook than the opening movement. 'If you cannot discover reasons for happiness in yourself, look at others. Get out among the people. Look what a good time they have simply surrendering themselves to joy.' Tchaikovsky's extensive musical citations of a children's folksong, 'The birch tree', is poignant when one considers two dovetailing facts: firstly that the poem describes the tree as a solitary woman, and secondly that this movement was sketched only days after Tchaikovsky's proposal to Antonina (only a week after their first meeting). A final reprise of the fate motive reminds us of eternal suffering, yet even this haunting figure cannot detract from the electrifying ending to one of Tchaikovsky's best-crafted works.

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