

Peter Ilyich Tchaikovsky, Symphony No. 4 in f minor, Op.36

Born: May 7, 1840, Votinsk

Died: November 6, 1893, St. Petersburg

In 1877, with his apprentice years behind him, Tchaikovsky was at the threshold of his creative maturity. Introverted, neurotic, and quite given to melancholia, the composer was preoccupied with thoughts of fate ("Fate, the Mocker," as he called it), a force before which man stood helplessly. The time was ripe for Tchaikovsky to personally take part in a living melodrama, and that was exactly what happened.

He had just finished reading Pushkin's *Eugene Onegin*, with the idea of setting it to music as a piece for the operatic stage. In the story, the heroine, Tatiana, reveals her love in a letter to Onegin, only to receive his rebuff. The composer's sympathy was all for the injured young girl. To him, Onegin's unchivalrous behavior was deplorable.

So, when the composer himself received a similar letter from a lovesick young student, he saw the parallel, made the mistake of replying, paid the young lady a visit, and let himself in for the tragedy to follow. He married her. He did this with the full knowledge that he was not physically attracted to her, or, for that matter, to any woman at all. Moreover, this particular girl was intellectually far beneath him and, as it turned out, emotionally unstable. A few weeks of utter misery, and Tchaikovsky fled in panic, suicide in mind. After being pulled from a river, he lay unconscious in a hotel for two days and then was sent off to Switzerland to recuperate. Throughout this quagmire of events, somehow the first movement of the *Fourth Symphony* came into being.

There was another woman in this story. Nadejda von Meck was a wealthy widow who, through her largesse, had freed Tchaikovsky from the tedium of teaching, making it possible for him to devote himself entirely to composition. The acquaintance of these two had also started with a letter, a letter beginning a strange fourteen-year correspondence. Mme. Von Meck had written to thank Tchaikovsky for executing a commission. "It would be superfluous to tell you of the enthusiasm I feel for your music," she wrote.... "Thus I shall make only one statement, which I ask you to accept as literal truth—your music makes life easier and more pleasant to go through." Commissions from the lady began to increase, eventually to be replaced by an annual subsidy.

From the outset, the two correspondents agreed that personal encounters were to be avoided. Their letters would soon become less restrained, grow more intimate, and eventually become exchanges of innermost feelings. It was Nadejda who financed that trip to Switzerland and, later on, to Italy, where on this prolonged flight, Tchaikovsky would finish the Fourth Symphony, dedicating it "To My Best Friend" (Nadejda, of course).

The world premiere took place in Moscow on February 22, 1898, with Nicholas Rubinstein conducting. While this was going on, the composer, in a Florentine hotel, nervously awaited news of the public's reaction. After days of anxiety, reports of an indifferent reception filtered in. Perhaps the negative response was due to the fact that Tchaikovsky's work was taking on more profundity, a profundity the public did not understand.

In a letter to Nadejda, the composer wrote: “Without you I could never have written this symphony.” Although he openly admitted that the work had a program, it was only to his “beloved friend” that he would attempt to put the meaning of “Our Symphony” into words.

The first movement opens with a fanfare—the Fate Motive. “This is fate,” he wrote, “that ominous power of destiny which hinders our striving after happiness, preventing us from attaining our goal and jealously ensuring... that the heavens above us are not cloudless—a power like a sword of Damocles constantly poised above our spirits... There is nothing to do but submit and vainly to complain.”

Tchaikovsky points to parallels between this work and Beethoven’s Fifth. Charles Burr observes that there is a great difference between the two works. While the program of Beethoven’s Fifth could be “Courage in the Face of Fate,” Tchaikovsky’s seems to be “Helplessness in the Face of Fate.”

According to the composer, the second movement “shows another kind of suffering. It is sad, yet also sweet, to lose oneself in the past.” In the third movement, there are “capricious arabesques, visions which flit across the mind when one has drunk some wine and is a little tipsy.”

The *Finale* “is the picture of a folk holiday... See how these people understand how to be gay... simple and basic pleasure still exists... Rejoice in the happiness of others and you can still live.” Here, in order to suggest life in a Russian village, the composer bases his theme on the Russian folk song, *Yonder in the Field Stands a Birch Tree*.