

ProgramNotes

Wednesday, October 6

Peter Ilyich Tchaikovsky
(1840-1893)

Fatum, Op. 77

Composed in 1868.

*Premiered on February 27, 1869 in Moscow,
conducted by Nikolai Rubinstein*



Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky by Nikolay Kuznetsov, 1893.

In 1859, Anton Rubinstein established the Russian Musical Society in St. Petersburg; a year later his brother Nikolai opened the Society's branch in Moscow. Since one of the important aims of the Society was to encourage musical education in Russia, it instituted classes almost immediately in both cities. St. Petersburg was first to receive an imperial charter to open a conservatory and offer a formal curriculum of instruction, and Peter Tchaikovsky, who had to quit his job as a clerk in

the Ministry of Justice to devote himself to music, was in the inaugural class of students when the school was officially opened in 1862. By January 1866, he had completed his studies in theory and composition, principally with Rubinstein and Nikolai Zarembo, and he was in need of a job. On the basis of his academic work (which included a cantata for the graduation examinations courageously based on the same Ode to Joy text by Schiller that Beethoven had set in his Ninth Symphony), Rubinstein recommended Tchaikovsky to Nikolai as a teacher for the music classes in Moscow. Though reluctant to leave the rich cultural milieu of St. Petersburg, Tchaikovsky accepted the much-needed position, and he arrived in Moscow in mid-January 1866.

Nikolai Rubinstein already knew of Tchaikovsky's ambition to compose, and he encouraged his young instructor to supplement his teaching duties with creative work. Tchaikovsky revised (and Rubinstein successfully premiered) the Overture in F major that he had sketched before leaving St. Petersburg, and then composed an Overture on Danish Themes commissioned for the festivities surrounding the upcoming marriage of the Tsarevich to a Danish bride. Encouraged by these early successes, he undertook his Symphony No. 1 (which Rubinstein introduced to considerable acclaim in February 1868) and his first opera, *The Voyevode* (staged, with good results, at the Moscow Bolshoi on February 11, 1869). In the autumn of 1868, during the preparations for the premiere of *The Voyevode*, Tchaikovsky composed another orchestral piece, his first symphonic poem, which he titled *Fatum*. Though only 28, Tchaikovsky had long felt the weight of fate in his own life, perhaps an inevitable emotional response to the homosexuality whose private-public conflict registered so strongly with him during those years, and he might have hoped that the work would achieve some sort of personal catharsis for him. A decade later Tchaikovsky revealed his fatalistic turn of mind when he wrote to his patroness, Nadezhda von Meck, about the motto theme in the Fourth Symphony: "This is Fate, the fatal power which hinders one in the pursuit of happiness from gaining the goal, which jealously provides that peace and comfort do not prevail, that the sky is not free from clouds — a might that swings, like the sword of Damocles, constantly over the head, that poisons continuously the soul." For *Fatum*, however, Tchaikovsky provided nothing more than the title, so Rubinstein persuaded him to add some lines by the late Russian poet Konstantin Batyushkov to help guide the audience at the premiere, which he conducted with the Russian Musical Society on February 27, 1869: Man is born a slave, a slave he dies. Will even death reveal to him why thus he labored in this vale of tears? *Fatum* is not nearly so glum as these verses indicate, and the audience responded well at the concert, though the critics had few kind words for the new piece. Tchaikovsky's

craft did not yet match his vision, however, and a performance the following month in St. Petersburg, conducted by the influential Mili Balakirev, was received icily. Balakirev sent Tchaikovsky a scathing appraisal of *Fatum* after the concert, and the impressionable composer found such merit in it that he destroyed the score the following year. (The two remained friends, however. It was Balakirev who suggested the subject and even the form of *Romeo and Juliet* of 1869, Tchaikovsky's first masterpiece.) The parts, however, were preserved in the library of the Moscow Conservatory, and in 1896, three years after the composer's death, Mitrofan Petrovich Belaiev, the wealthy timber merchant and musical amateur who founded a publishing house to propagate Russian music, reconstructed *Fatum* and issued the score with the chronologically corrupt opus number 77.

Fatum begins with an introductory section of bold orchestral statements separated by dramatic pauses. The bassoon presents a lugubrious, low-register motive that is taken up by the other woodwinds and then by the cellos and basses before becoming the subject of a full orchestral treatment in the following episode. The tempo quickens and the violas introduce a march-like theme from which much of the ensuing music is developed. Modified repeats of the introductory strain and the sections based on the lugubrious and march-like themes occupy most of the second half of *Fatum*, which concludes with a somber coda that echoes the work's opening gestures.

Violin Concerto in D major, Op. 35

Composed in 1878.

Premiered on December 4, 1881 in Vienna, conducted by Hans Richter with Adolf Brodsky as soloist.

In the summer of 1877, Tchaikovsky undertook the disastrous marriage that lasted less than three weeks and resulted in his emotional collapse and attempted suicide. He fled from Moscow to his brother Modeste in St. Petersburg, where he recovered his wits and discovered he could find solace in his work. He spent the late fall and winter completing his Fourth Symphony and the opera *Eugene Onégin*. The brothers decided that travel outside of Russia would be an additional balm to the composer's spirit, and they duly installed themselves at Clarens on Lake Geneva in Switzerland soon after the first of the year.

In Clarens, Tchaikovsky had already begun work on a piano sonata when he heard the colorful *Symphonie Espagnole* by the French composer Edouard Lalo. He was so excited by the possibilities of a work for solo violin and orchestra that he set aside the sonata and immediately began a concerto of his own. By the end of April, the work was finished. Tchaikovsky sent

the manuscript to Leopold Auer, a friend who headed the violin department at the St. Petersburg Conservatory and who was also Court Violinist to the Czar, hoping to have him premiere the work. Much to the composer's regret, Auer returned the piece as "unplayable," and apparently spread that word with such authority to other violinists that it was more than three years before the Violin Concerto was heard in public. It was Adolf Brodsky, a former colleague of Tchaikovsky at the Moscow Conservatory, who first accepted the challenge of this Concerto when he premiered successfully it with the Vienna Philharmonic in 1881.

The Concerto opens quietly with a tentative introductory tune. A foretaste of the main theme soon appears in the violins, around which a quick crescendo is mounted to usher in the soloist. After a few unaccompanied measures, the violin presents the lovely main theme above a simple string background. After an elaborated repeat of this melody, a transition follows which eventually involves the entire orchestra and gives the soloist the first opportunity for pyrotechnical display. The second theme begins a long buildup leading into the development, launched with a sweeping presentation of the main theme. The soloist soon steals back the attention with breathtaking leaps and double stops. The sweeping mood returns, giving way to a flashing cadenza as a link to the recapitulation. The flute sings the main theme before the violin it takes over, and all then follows the order of the exposition. The Andante begins with a chorale for woodwinds which is heard again at the end of the movement to serve as a frame around the musical picture inside. On the canvas of this picture is displayed a soulful melody for the violin suggesting a Gypsy fiddler. The finale is joined to the slow movement without a break. With the propulsive spirit of a dashing Cossack Trepak, the finale flies by amid the soloist's dizzying show of agility and speed.

Symphony No. 1 in G minor, Op. 13, "Winter Dreams"

Composed in 1866; revised in 1874.

Premiere of complete Symphony on February 15, 1868 in Moscow, conducted by Nikolai Rubinstein; the second and third movements had been heard earlier.

When Tchaikovsky arrived from St. Petersburg to take up his position at the Moscow Conservatory in mid-January 1866, he was greeted at the train station like an old friend by Nikolai Rubinstein, the school's director. Nikolai immediately took the young musician under his wing, lending him clothes (including a frock coat left behind by Wieniawski on a recent visit), introducing him to his wide circle of acquaintances, offering him

a room in his home, and lavishing upon him every hospitality. (Rubinstein also included Tchaikovsky in his nightly rounds of tavern-hopping, during which each impressed the other with his capacity for alcohol.) Nikolai encouraged Tchaikovsky to supplement his teaching duties by continuing his creative work, and the first project he suggested was a revision for full orchestra of the Overture in F major written at the end of the preceding year. Tchaikovsky had conducted the original chamber orchestra version of the work as a student in December, shortly before he left the St. Petersburg Conservatory. The success of the revised version when it was conducted in Moscow by Nikolai on March 4th (the first public performance of one of Tchaikovsky's compositions) was such that the young composer was motivated to begin writing a symphony that same month. Almost as a fatalistic mockery of the enthusiasm with which it was begun, this G minor Symphony was to cause Tchaikovsky more emotional turmoil and physical suffering than any other piece he ever wrote.

On April 5th, only days after he had begun sketching the symphony, Tchaikovsky discovered a harsh newspaper review by César Cui of a cantata he had written for his graduation from the St. Petersburg Conservatory. "When I read this terrible judgment," he later told his friend Alina Bryullova, "I hardly know what happened to me.... I spent the entire day wandering aimlessly about the town repeating to myself, 'I am sterile, I am a nonentity, nothing will ever come of me, I have no talent.'" In defiance of his tottering self-confidence, he pressed on doggedly with the new symphony. On April 25th he wrote to his brother Anatoli, "I have been sleeping very badly lately. My 'apoplectic strokes' have returned stronger than ever.... My nerves are in an awful state because: 1) my symphony which is not going well; 2) Rubinstein and [the composer's friend] Tarnovsky, who have noticed that I am easily frightened, try all they can to scare me in all sorts of ways; 3) the ever-present thought that I am going to die soon and will not have time to finish my symphony." His misery was relieved a bit when he received news that Anton Rubinstein had conducted the recently revised Overture in F major in St. Petersburg on May 13th to much acclaim, but he was still looking eagerly forward to the quiet weeks of a country summer vacation to heal his afflictions.

Tchaikovsky originally planned to spend the summer of 1866 with his family at Kamenka, near St. Petersburg. However, he chose instead to accept an invitation from the sisters Vera and Elizabeth Davidova and their mother to join them at Myatlev, near Peterhof, because, he said, his straitened financial situation would not allow the longer trip and he was frightened by the reports that weather had made the road to Kamenka impassable. Actually, he may have been trying to rouse his passion for Vera in another of his unsuccessful attempts to deny his homosexuality to himself and the world. The visit seems to have started out well enough at the end of May, when Tchaikovsky played piano duet

versions of Mendelssohn's "Italian" Symphony and Schumann's orchestral works with Vera, took long, solitary walks and made enough progress on the new symphony to report to his sister Alexandra that he had begun its orchestration on June 6th. But his mental state soon began to collapse to an alarming degree from the frustration with his new composition, perhaps aggravated by his conflicting sexual feelings. In his biography of his brother, Modeste Tchaikovsky recalled that Peter's troubles were "most probably due to the fact that he wrote this symphony not only during the day but also at night. He referred in his letters to 'throbbings in the head' and insomnia as a result of working at night. In spite of his application and enthusiasm, the work progressed slowly, and the further he got with the symphony, the more Peter Ilyich's nerves became affected. His sleep was ruined by the unaccustomed work, and sleepless nights paralyzed his energy and ability to compose. At the end of July, all this came to a head in fits brought on by terrible nervous disorders such as he never again experienced in his life. The doctor who was called in to treat him found that 'he was on the verge of madness' and, during the first few days, considered his case almost hopeless. The chief and worst symptoms of this illness were hallucinations, a terrifying sense of dread, and a feeling of complete numbness in his extremities." Rest was prescribed, and Tchaikovsky gladly gave up work on the new symphony for the time being. He never again composed at night.

Tchaikovsky was well enough to return to Moscow in August, but he decided to detour through St. Petersburg to show the unfinished manuscript to his teachers, Anton Rubinstein and Zarembo, in the hope of securing its performance during the coming season of the Russian Musical Society. Both condemned the score, however, and demanded that it be thoroughly revised before he brought it to them again. He arrived in Moscow in time for the official opening of the Conservatory in September, playing Glinka's *Ruslan and Ludmilla Overture* on the piano as part of the inaugural ceremonies. The unfinished symphony was still much on his mind, but before he could return to it, he had to finish an Overture on Danish Themes for the festivities surrounding the upcoming marriage of the Tsarevich to a Danish bride. It was not until late November 1866, therefore, that the G minor Symphony was completed. Despite incorporating the changes ordered by his St. Petersburg teachers, only the second and third movements were accepted for performance there. These received considerable applause when Nikolai Rubinstein conducted them on February 11, 1867, though the Scherzo had been less successful when it was given a trial at his earlier concert in Moscow on December 10th. Tchaikovsky continued to revise the work, which was finally given in its complete form by Nikolai in Moscow on February 15, 1868 "with great success," reported the composer to his brother Anatoli. More changes were made to the score after its premiere, especially in tightening the structure of the first movement, before

it was published early in 1875 by Jurgenson. This is the form in which the Symphony No. 1 is known today.

Tchaikovsky had a life-long affection for this Symphony that was the product of such travail. He wrote to a friend on October 17, 1883, "Despite its glaring deficiencies I have a soft spot for it, for it is a sin of my sweet youth." And a month later, to Mme. von Meck: "I don't know if you are acquainted with this work of mine. Although it is immature in many respects it is essentially better and richer in content than many other more mature works." About the titles appended to the Symphony he left no such thoughts. The entire Symphony was inscribed "Winter Dreams." The first two movements were called "Reveries of a Winter Journey" and "Land of Desolation, Land of Mists"; the closing movements are without sobriquet. There is no specific program apparent in the music, though Tchaikovsky may have intended that this be his contribution to the many depictions of the harsh Russian winters that have always been popular subjects in that country's literature and art.

The first movement opens as the flute and bassoon present the doleful main theme above the murmurings of the violins. The complementary melody, more lyrical in phrasing and brighter in mood, is sung initially by the clarinet. The development section,

typically Tchaikovskian in many of its orchestral techniques, combines true motivic elaboration with a certain amount of boisterous, newly invented figuration. The recapitulation returns the themes of the beginning and ends with the hushed whispers of the first measures. A chorale-like passage for strings opens and closes the second movement. Within this frame are set two folkish melodies: the first, a plaintive tune, intoned by the oboe, has hints of the Volga Boatmen; the other is a more flowing song given first by the flutes and violas. The nimble Scherzo, indebted to Mendelssohn for its effervescent writing, is based on a movement from Tchaikovsky's Piano Sonata in C-sharp minor, composed in 1865. The lovely central trio is the first of the succession of great waltzes Tchaikovsky penned for orchestra. The finale is a gloriously noisy display of orchestral color and rhythmic energy. It begins with a slow introduction ("lugubrious," notes the score) during which the violins present the Russian folk song The Gardens Bloomed. A vivacious main theme in fast tempo is hurled forth by the full orchestra before the folk song returns to serve as the second theme. Twice the tempo is increased in the closing pages so that the ending of the Symphony is filled with brilliant whirling vitality and bursting high spirits.



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