

Symphony No. 4 in F minor, Op. 36

Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky

Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky became involved with his mysterious patron Nadezhda von Meck and began composing his Fourth Symphony practically at the same time. The two “projects” were greatly intermeshed in his mind. In letters to von Meck he often referred to it as “our symphony,” sometimes even as “your symphony.” By May 1877 he had completed the lion’s share of work on the new piece. He wrote to her that month:

I should like to dedicate it to you, because I believe you would find in it an echo of your most intimate thoughts and emotions.

Then Tchaikovsky’s life veered off in a bizarre direction when he precipitously married and just as quickly abandoned his bride. During the misadventure of Tchaikovsky’s wedding and his subsequent meltdown, the Fourth Symphony was put on hold. Only in the latter half of 1877 did Tchaikovsky return to edit and orchestrate what he had composed through May. He wrote to von Meck late that summer:

Our symphony progresses. The first movement will give me a great deal of trouble with respect to orchestration. It is very long and complicated: at the same time I consider it the best movement. The three remaining movements are very simple, and it will be easy and pleasant to orchestrate them.

Tchaikovsky’s comment is apt: the center of gravity is indeed placed on the first movement, and the other three stand as shorter, less imposing pendants. When von Meck begged him to explain the meaning behind the music, Tchaikovsky broke his rule of not

revealing his secret programs and penned a rather detailed prose description of the opening movement:

The introduction is the seed of the whole symphony, undoubtedly the central theme. This is Fate, *i.e.*, that fateful force which prevents the impulse toward happiness from entirely achieving its goal, forever on jealous guard lest peace and well-being should ever be attained in complete and unclouded form, hanging above us like the Sword of Damocles, constantly and unremittently poisoning the soul. Its force is invisible, and can never be overcome. Our only choice is to surrender to it, and to languish fruitlessly. ...

When all seems lost, there appears a sweet and gentle daydream. Some blissful, radiant human image hurries by and beckons us away. ...

IN SHORT

Born: May 7, 1840, in Votkinsk, Russia

Died: November 6, 1893, in St. Petersburg

Work composed: December 28, 1877–January 9, 1878; dedicated “To my best friend,” *i.e.*, Mme. Nadezhda von Meck

World premiere: February 22, 1878, at a concert of the Russian Musical Society in Moscow, Nikolai Rubinstein, conductor

New York Philharmonic premiere: January 31, 1890, with Walter Damrosch conducting the New York Symphony (which would merge with the New York Philharmonic in 1928)

Most recent New York Philharmonic performance: November 19, 2016, Jaap van Zweden, conductor

Estimated duration: ca. 45 minutes

No! These were dreams, and fate wakes us from them. Thus all life is an unbroken alternation of harsh reality with fleeting dreams and visions of happiness ... There is no escape. ... We can only drift upon this sea until it engulfs and submerges us in its depths. That, roughly, is the program of the first movement.

And so he continues, at length, for each of the ensuing movements: the second, “another phase of depression,” “that melancholy

feeling that comes in the evenings when, weary from your labor, you sit alone, and take a book — but it falls from your hand”; the third, comprising “the elusive images that can rush past in the imagination when you have drunk a little wine and experience the first stage of intoxication”; the fourth, “a picture of festive merriment of the people.” Even if one recognizes that Tchaikovsky penned these words after he had essentially completed the symphony, it is possible to find something authentic and convincing in his

Angels and Muses

In 1877, the year of the Fourth Symphony, the 36-year-old Tchaikovsky consolidated his relationship with Nadezhda Filaretovna von Meck. She had initially contacted Tchaikovsky through violinist Yosif Yosifovich Kotek, his former pupil, also sending word out via Tchaikovsky’s mentor, Nikolai Rubinstein. Her offer was a generous but undemanding commission to make an arrangement of one of Kotek’s compositions.

That was that, Tchaikovsky assumed, but then a second letter arrived from von Meck. She wrote:

I should like very much to tell you at length of my fancies and thoughts about you, but I fear to take up your time, of which you have so little to spare. Let me say only that my feeling for you is a thing of the spirit and very dear to me.

Things were getting interesting. Tchaikovsky responded the next day: “Why do you hesitate to tell me all your thoughts? ... Perhaps I know you better than you imagine.” An affair was born, but an affair with a supremely strange twist: von Meck would support Tchaikovsky through a monthly stipend, but by her decree they must at all costs avoid meeting in person. There was an emotional price to pay for this, to be sure. Von Meck was mercurial, but Tchaikovsky handled his patron adeptly until she suddenly broke off their relationship, almost without warning, in 1890.



From top: Tchaikovsky; Nadezhda Filaretovna von Meck

program, given the emotional roller coaster he had ridden in the preceding months.

On the other hand, music is not prose, and its essence is different from that of the written word — or, as Tchaikovsky reminded von Meck by quoting Heine: “Where words end, music begins.” To his pupil and friend Sergei Taneyev, Tchaikovsky wrote:

Of course my symphony is program music, but it would be impossible to give the

program in words. ... But ought this not always to be the case with a symphony, the most lyrical of musical forms? Ought it not to express all those things for which words cannot be found but which nevertheless arise in the heart and cry out for expression?

Instrumentation: two flutes and piccolo, two oboes, two clarinets, two bassoons, four horns, two trumpets, three trombones, tuba, timpani, triangle, cymbals, bass drum, and strings.

Listen for ... the Oboe Introduction

A famous oboe line opens the second movement, *Andantino in modo di canzona*, a generally melancholy movement in B-flat minor:

Andantino in modo di canzona

Oboe

p semplice, ma grazioso

etc.

Tchaikovsky wrote to Nadezhda von Meck of this movement:

You feel nostalgic for the past, yet no compulsion to start life over again. Life has wearied you; it is pleasant to pause and weigh things up.”

Much of the movement does seem to carry a heavy weight on its shoulders, but — as in the first movement — the proceedings are leavened by glimpses of balletic arabesques.