

# Symphony No. 6 in B minor, Op. 74, *Pathétique*

## Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky

Most subtitles attached to symphonies are appended after the fact, without the composer's involvement. True to form, the name *Pathétique* (to be understood in the classic connotation of "infused with pathos" rather than the modern sense of "sadly inept") was suggested after this work was first heard, but barely. Tchaikovsky's brother Modest proposed the subtitle *Pateticheskaja* the day after the premiere, and the composer embraced it enthusiastically — for about 24 hours. Then he shot off a note to his publisher, Pyotr Jurgenson, asking that the name not be printed on the title page, a request the publisher ignored.

In any case, it was an improvement on the title that had identified the work at its premiere: *Program Symphony*. Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov said that at the concert he asked Tchaikovsky what the program was, to which Tchaikovsky replied that "there was one, of course, but he did not wish to announce it." Months earlier, Tchaikovsky had told his nephew, Bob Davidov (to whom the symphony is dedicated), that the piece would have "a program of a kind that would remain an enigma to all ..., [a] program saturated with subjective feeling." Subjective feeling was as mother's milk to Tchaikovsky, and it is abundantly displayed in this work; even without the composer's intimation, the listener would suspect that something specific was being suggested through this symphony. Tchaikovsky, however, had his way: the exact program remains a mystery.

Tchaikovsky was always given to self-doubt, such that the satisfaction he expressed in a letter to Jurgenson leaps off the page: "I give you my word of honor that never in my life have I been so contented, so proud, so happy in the knowledge that I have written a good piece." The other shoe

was bound to drop, and it did two months later, with the premiere. "It was not exactly a failure," Tchaikovsky reported, "but it was received with some hesitation." He should not have been surprised. What was an audience to make of a symphony so unorthodox as this, so redolent of private agony, so mysterious that its ending dies away in a whimper of nearly inaudible *pianississimo*?

The symphony emerges slowly from nothingness, with the unusual sound of divided double basses and a solo bassoon, then enriched by divided violas, then with melancholy comments from the woodwinds, before breaking into a nervous *Allergro non troppo*. Tenderness, too, inhabits this first movement, in the ardent theme for strings that all but quotes the "Flower Song" from Bizet's *Carmen*, an opera Tchaikovsky admired greatly; this gives way to a blustery

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## IN SHORT

**Born:** May 7, 1840, in Votkinsk, Vyatka Province, Russia

**Died:** November 6, 1893, in St. Petersburg

**Work composed:** February–August 1893; dedicated: to Vladimir ("Bob") Lvovich Davidov, the composer's nephew

**World premiere:** October 28, 1893, at the Hall of Nobles in St. Petersburg, with the composer conducting

**New York Philharmonic premiere:** March 16, 1894, with Walter Damrosch conducting the New York Symphony (which merged with the New York Philharmonic in 1928); this marked the US Premiere

**Most recent New York Philharmonic performance:** February 11, 2017, Semyon Bychkov, conductor

**Estimated duration:** ca. 47 minutes

section that quotes a Russian liturgical chant, surely connected in some way to the composer's unrevealed plot.

Quirkiness continues with the second movement, which one would be tempted to call a captivating waltz were it not for the fact that it is in 5/4 meter. Choreographers of that time would have demanded the composer's head on a platter if he had required dancers in one of his ballets to count out five beats to a bar. The movement's wistfulness is swept away by the ensuing scherzo, growing from quiet fluttering into a march that crashes relentlessly to its deafening conclusion.

Were it not for its sinister overtones, one might take the march for the symphony's conclusion. The real finale is a curious appendage, the opposite of a "victory ending." Its overriding emotion is despair, underscored by descending melodic sighs, an insistence on the minor mode (or, at least, a failure of

major-mode passages to break through the gloom), and a final page that disappears into nothingness. What could it all mean?

Tchaikovsky died nine days after the *Pathétique's* premiere, apparently the victim of cholera (though suicide has been suggested — and endlessly debated). Three weeks later, his final symphony received its second performance. Rimsky-Korsakov wrote:

This time, the public greeted it rapturously, and since that moment the fame of the symphony has kept growing and growing, spreading gradually over Russia and Europe.

**Instrumentation:** three flutes (one doubling piccolo), two oboes, two clarinets and bass clarinet, two bassoons, four horns, four trumpets, three trombones, tuba, timpani, cymbals, bass drum, tam-tam, and strings.

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## In the Composer's Words

In 1892, before he began to set any notes down on manuscript paper, Tchaikovsky wrote a cursory sketch toward a scenario for his impending symphony:

The ultimate essence of the thirst for activity. Must be short. (Finale DEATH — result of collapse.) Second movement, love; third, disappointments; fourth ends dying away (also short).

First thoughts often give way to editing, and this would be no exception, but at least it is clear that some vague narrative informed this enigmatic symphony from its very beginning.



Tchaikovsky in 1893