



PROGRAM

TCHAIKOVSKY

Symphony No. 4

Andante sostenuto

Andantino in modo di canzona

Scherzo: Pizzicato ostinato

Finale: Allegro con fuoco

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2022-23 Sunday Matinees

TCHAIKOVSKY'S FOURTH

Sunday, Feb. 26 @ 3 p.m.

Carl St.Clair, conductor
Pacific Symphony

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*Performance at the Segerstrom Center for the Arts
Renée and Henry Segerstrom Concert Hall*

PROGRAM NOTES

Pyotr Ilyitch Tchaikovsky

Symphony No. 4 in F Minor, Op. 36

Born: May 7, 1840, Votkinsk, Russia

Died: November 6, 1893, Saint Petersburg, Russia

Composed: 1877-1878

Premiered: February 22, 1878 in Moscow

Most recent Pacific Symphony

performance: October 22, 2016

in the Renée and Henry Segerstrom Concert Hall with Carl St.Clair conducting

Instrumentation: three flutes including piccolo, two oboes, two clarinets, two bassoons, four French horns, two trumpets, three trombones, one tuba, timpani, percussion, and strings

Estimated duration: Approximately 44 minutes

Much as we enjoy drawing connections between a composer's life and his music, it can often be misleading to do so. Not so in the case of Tchaikovsky—especially with respect to his compositions dating to the years 1877 and 1878, which included the Symphony No. 4.

According to many musicologists, including the noted Tchaikovsky authority David Brown, this symphony and his opera *Eugene Onegin* reflect the turbulent state of Tchaikovsky's emotions at the most difficult time of his life.

Always self-conscious about the way he was perceived by critics, colleagues, and friends, Tchaikovsky was tormented by inner confusion over his sexual identity and seemed desperate to live a life of mature respectability. In 1877, during the period when he was working on both the fourth symphony and *Onegin*, he became aware of a letter that had been written to him by a 16-year-old student, Antonina Miliukhova, who was infatuated with him.

In the "letter scene" of *Onegin*, an operatic setting of a novel-length romantic satire by Pushkin, Tchaikovsky dramatized a similar incident in which the opera's heroine, Tatyana, pours her soul into a confession of love to Onegin, who rejects her. Many musicologists call this scene—which captures the agonized depths of Tatyana's desire and its inevitable rejection—the greatest in all of Tchaikovsky's operas, informed by his own deep ambivalence regarding Antonina. At the same time, composing his fourth symphony, he was preoccupied with the role of implacable fate in personal happiness, and embedded it in the symphony: Throughout the Fourth, we hear power of fate juxtaposed against the struggle for personal happiness.

"It seems to me as if the power of fate has drawn to me that girl," Tchaikovsky wrote to his patron and confidante Nadezhda von Meck, to whom he dedicated his Fourth.



Letters to his brother from the same period show he was considering the possibility of marriage to counter rumors about his homosexual encounters. Dangerous as homosexuality was in that time and place—punishable by exile to Siberia—it seems likely that Tchaikovsky was more concerned with appearances, and saw marriage to Antonina as his chance for an outwardly normal life. He married her (the proposal was hers) on July 6 of 1877. The marriage was an unmitigated disaster even though Tchaikovsky made it clear in his written acceptance to Antonina that there could be no physical relationship between them. Still, the reality of marriage plunged Tchaikovsky into such unbearable tension that he could not bear to be near her. In one near-encounter when they found themselves in the same room, they passed without exchanging a word.

The opening movement of Tchaikovsky's Fourth comprises more than half the symphony's total length and sets up the contest between implacable fate and personal happiness. Though the symphony has always inspired comparisons to Beethoven's Fifth—characterized in schoolroom mnemonics as "fate knocking at the door"—Tchaikovsky's represents a personal struggle rather than a philosophical one. From the first moments we hear the blazing fanfare of the fate theme opening the reaches of a wintry landscape to the listener. The intensity of the melody and its realization in the brasses conveys not only the power of fate, but also the composer's personal fright in confronting it.

The melancholy second movement seems to open an icy, windswept Russian landscape before us. The thematic material, though original to Tchaikovsky, is inspired by Russian folklore, but the structure is a classical canon. In the third movement, a scherzo with beautiful, persistent pizzicato passages in the strings, has an exotic sound with the feeling of an arabesque—perhaps informed by Tchaikovsky's ballet writing. (It is also noted for its brief but technically demanding solo for piccolo, one of the most difficult in the symphonic repertory.)

The fourth movement is marked *allegro* and combines familiar Russian folk themes with the original fate theme from movement one. Here the implacability of fate, which had the power to sweep aside everything in its path in movement, seemingly finds resolution with the human search for daily happiness. The unanswerable questions for critics, and for us listeners, is this: Is this resolution authentic, or is it just Tchaikovsky groping for a solution, as he did with his marriage?

Michael Clive is a cultural reporter living in the Litchfield Hills of Connecticut. He is program annotator for Pacific Symphony and Louisiana Philharmonic, and editor-in-chief for The Santa Fe Opera.