

Symphony No. 5 in E minor, op. 64

PIOTR ILYICH TCHAIKOVSKY

Born

May 7 (new style), 1840, at Votkinsk in the district of Viatka, Russia

Died

November 6, 1893, in St. Petersburg

Work composed

May–August 26, 1888, mostly in Frolovskoe, outside Moscow (although conceptual sketches preceded actual composition work by about a month); dedicated to Count Ave-Lallemant, Chairman of the Committee of the Hamburg Philharmonic Society

World premiere

November 17, 1888, in St. Petersburg, by the St. Petersburg Philharmonic Society, conducted by the composer

New York Philharmonic premiere

February 8, 1890, Theodore Thomas, conductor

Last New York Philharmonic performance

July 26, 2003, in Colorado, Lorin Maazel, conductor, at the Bravo! Vail Valley Music Festival in Colorado

It should come as no surprise that Tchaikovsky approached his Fifth Symphony from a position of extreme self-doubt, since that was nearly always his posture vis-à-vis his incipient creations. In May 1888 he confessed in a letter to his brother Modest that he feared his imagination had dried up, that he had nothing more to express in

music. Still, there was a glimmer of hope: “I am hoping to collect, little by little, material for a symphony,” he wrote.

Tchaikovsky spent the summer of 1888 at a vacation home he had built on a forested hillside at Frolovskoe, not far from his home base in Moscow. The idyllic locale apparently played a major role in his managing to complete this symphony in the short span of four months. Tchaikovsky made a habit of keeping his patron, Nadezhda von Meck, informed about his compositions through detailed letters; thanks to this ongoing correspondence we have a good deal of information about how the Fifth Symphony progressed during that summer. Tchaikovsky had met her a dozen years earlier – well, not “met” exactly, since an eccentric stipulation of her philanthropy was that they should avoid any personal contact whatsoever. Tchaikovsky’s work on the symphony was already well along when he broached the subject with her in a letter on June 22: “I shall work my hardest. I am exceedingly anxious to prove to myself, as to others, that I am not played out as a composer. Have I told you that I intend to write a symphony? The beginning was difficult, but now inspiration seems to have come. We shall see....” His correspondence throughout those months brims with allusions to the emotional background of this piece, which involved resignation to fate, the designs of Providence, murmurs of doubt, and similarly dark thoughts.

Critics blasted the symphony at its premiere, due in part to the composer’s limited skill on the podium; however, the audience was enthusiastic. Predictably, Tchaikovsky decided the critics must be right. In December he wrote to Mme. von Meck:

Having played my Symphony twice in Petersburg and once in Prague, I have come to the conclusion that it is a failure. There is something repellent in it, some over-exaggerated color, some insincerity of fabrication which the public instinctively recognizes. It was clear to me that the applause and ovations referred not to this but to other works of mine, and that the Symphony itself will never please the public.

Elsewhere he wrote of his Fifth Symphony: "the organic sequence fails,

and a skillful join has to be made.... I cannot complain of lack of inventive power, but I have always suffered from want of skill in the management of form."

These comments reveal great perception; one might say that Tchaikovsky was wrong, but for all the right reasons. The work's orchestral palette is indeed colorful, despite the fact that the score employs an essentially Classical orchestra of modest proportions. The composer was quite on target about "the management of form" being his weak suit;

Tchaikovsky's Unusual Patron

When Tchaikovsky composed his Fifth Symphony, he was largely living on an allowance from Nadezhda Filaretovna von Meck. Immensely wealthy (thanks to the commercial success of her deceased husband, an engineer from Riga), sexually voracious (with 18 variously fathered children to prove it), and musically adept, she had positioned herself in Moscow society as a notable patron of the arts and, specifically, as a collector of musicians. She adored Tchaikovsky's music to the point of obsession, and in December 1876 commissioned him to make an arrangement of another composer's work.

In February 1877 von Meck wrote a second letter to Tchaikovsky: "I should like very much to tell you at length of my fancies and thoughts about you," she wrote, "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." Tchaikovsky responded the next



day: "Why do you hesitate to tell me all your thoughts? ... Perhaps I know you better than you imagine. If, some happy day, you will do me the honor of writing me what you have so far withheld, I shall be very grateful." An affair was born, but an affair with a supremely strange twist: they were not to meet in person.

For the next 13 years Tchaikovsky and von Meck exchanged an effusive correspondence that provides many details about the composer's creative process.

What's more, she deposited 500 rubles in Tchaikovsky's bank account every month, an act of benefaction that freed him to pursue his artistic goals without having to undertake "work for hire" to pay the bills.

Although von Meck was assuredly neurotic and mercurial, Tchaikovsky handled his patron adeptly until she suddenly broke off their relationship, almost without warning, in 1890.

indeed, the Fifth Symphony (like his very popular First Piano Concerto) may be viewed as something of a patchwork – the more so when compared to the relatively tight Fourth Symphony that had preceded it 11 years earlier. And if Tchaikovsky was embarrassed by the degree of overt sentiment he reached in the Fifth Symphony, it still fell short of the emotional frontiers he would cross in his Sixth.

“If Beethoven’s Fifth is Fate knocking at the door,” wrote a commentator when the piece was new, “Tchaikovsky’s Fifth is Fate trying to get out.” It nearly does so in a journey that threatens to culminate in a

series of climactic B-major chords. But, notwithstanding the frequent interruption of audience applause at that point, the adventure continues to a conclusion that is to some extent ambiguous: four closing E-major chords that we may hear as triumphant, but which may just as easily sound ominous.

Instrumentation: three flutes (one doubling piccolo), two oboes, two clarinets, two bassoons, four horns, two trumpets (although New York Philharmonic performance practice employs four), three trombones, tuba, timpani, and strings.

Listen For...



The Sound of Fate. The four movements of Tchaikovsky's Fifth Symphony are unified through common reference to a "motto theme," which is announced by the somber clarinets at the piece's outset. Most commentators agree that this represents the idea of Fate to which Tchaikovsky referred in his early writings about the piece. It reappears often in this symphony, sometimes

reworked considerably. It causes a brutal interruption in the middle of the slow movement (a languid elegy spotlighting the solo horn); it appears in a subdued statement by clarinets and bassoons near the end of the graceful third movement; and in the *Finale* the "Fate" motif is transposed from the minor mode into the major in a gesture that sounds at least temporarily triumphant.

The New York Philharmonic Connection

Piotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky had a strong connection with the two orchestras that would merge in 1928 to form today's New York Philharmonic. The early New York Philharmonic and the New York Symphony would, between them, give the U.S. premieres of 11 of his works — including that perennial favorite, the Sixth Symphony, "Pathétique" — and the Philharmonic gave the world premiere of the Second Piano Concerto on November 12, 1881, with pianist Madeleine Schiller, conducted by Theodore Thomas. Ten years later Tchaikovsky joined the New York Symphony's Conductor, Walter Damrosch, on May 5, 1891, for the inaugural concert of Carnegie Hall (then simply titled "Music Hall"); on that program he conducted the U.S. premiere of his *Coronation March*, surely an apt choice for the occasion.



Left: a "quote" in Tchaikovsky's hand from his Suite No. 3 dated April 29, 1891, in New York, one week before he led the New York Symphony in one of his works in the opening of Carnegie Hall, on May 5, 1891. Above: a cabinet photo of the composer inscribed to Walter Damrosch dated a year later, May 26, 1892, when the two men met at Cambridge University where they were awarded honorary doctorates.