

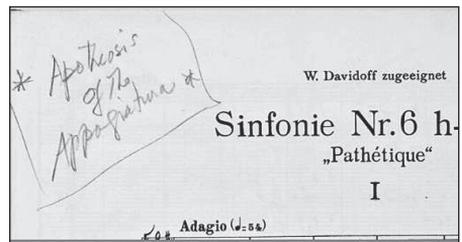
Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky's Symphony No. 6, *Pathétique*, received only three performances prior to its 1894 U.S. Premiere by the New York Symphony (which would merge with the New York Philharmonic in 1928): the World Premiere in St. Petersburg, nine days before the composer's death in 1893; a performance in Moscow led by future New York Philharmonic Music Director Wassily Safonoff; and the British Premiere in London shortly afterward. Walter Damrosch, who conducted the U.S. Premiere, had met Tchaikovsky on two occasions: once for the opening of Carnegie Hall in 1891, when the composer came to New York at his invitation, and the other on a visit to England, when they discussed the *Pathétique*, which was still a work in progress. After Tchaikovsky's death, Damrosch recalled: "[A] few days later arrived a package from Moscow containing the score and parts of his Symphony No. 6, the 'Pathétique.' It was like a message from the dead. I immediately put the work into rehearsal and gave it its first performance in America on the following Sunday. Its success was immediate and profound."

Since then, Tchaikovsky's *Pathétique* has become one of the most performed and beloved symphonies in the Philharmonic's repertoire, receiving more than 400 performances to date. In 1925 it was chosen by audience members and radio listeners as the second most popular symphony of all time, behind Beethoven's Fifth. The *Pathétique's* overwhelming popularity was buoyed in particular by Safonoff, the Philharmonic's first and only Russian Music Director, who conducted the work 12 times with the Orchestra during his tenure (1906–09). After Safonoff came Gustav Mahler, whose meticulously detailed interpretation clashed with his predecessor's intensely emotional approach. The *New York Post* took offense, describing Mahler's reading as "perfunctory and contemptuous" and asking, "if Mr. Mahler despises Tchaikovsky, why does he put him on his programme?" This alleged dislike, however, does not jive with Mahler's programming. He conducted the symphony five times in his one-and-a-half seasons as Music Director, as well as many other Tchaikovsky works in 20 performances total, including three all-Tchaikovsky programs.

The emotional power of the *Pathétique* was later harnessed by Leonard Bernstein, whose unique interpretation can be seen in the markings on his score, viewable in the Leon Levy Digital Archives. Former Philharmonic cellist Evangeline Benedetti remembers: "I'll never forget [Bernstein's] coming in with the Tchaikovsky Sixth Symphony, thrilled like a kid with a new toy, because he'd discovered that the whole first movement was based on appoggiaturas, and he changed our interpretation to emphasize that. It's no longer a routine war horse, because I continue to remember Lenny's enthusiasm about it."

— **The Archives**

To see Leonard Bernstein's marked score visit the **New York Philharmonic Leon Levy Digital Archives** at archives.nyphil.org and search "Bernstein Tchaikovsky 6."



One of Bernstein's notes on his score to Tchaikovsky's *Pathétique*

Francesca da Rimini, Fantasy after Dante, Op. 32 Symphony No. 6 in B minor, Op. 74, *Pathétique*

Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky

The most famous words in Dante's *Divine Comedy* are those that the poet finds inscribed above the gates of Hell: "Lasciate ogni speranza, voi ch'entrate" ("Abandon all hope, you who enter here"). *The Divine Comedy* recounts a spiritual journey that begins on Good Friday of the year 1300, and the catalyst is what one might call the mid-life crisis of Dante himself. In Canto III of *Inferno* (the first installment of *The Divine Comedy* triptych) he passes beneath that inscription accompanied by his guide, the Roman poet Virgil. The second most famous quotation from Dante is doubtless the poignant maxim uttered in Canto V, in the Second Circle of Hell, where the shade of Francesca da Rimini mournfully muses, "Nessun maggior dolore / Che ricordarsi del tempo felice / Nella miseria" ("There is no greater sorrow / Than to be mindful of the happy time / In misery").

Francesca has indeed abandoned all hope, but at least she's not stuck very deep down in the pit of Hell, where things get progressively worse the farther one gets from God. Francesca was a sinner, but her downfall was love — adulterous, to be sure, but love nonetheless. Born into the ruling family in Ravenna, she was married off for political reasons to a nobleman from Rimini, Giancotto Malatesta the Lame, and then fell in love with his younger brother, Paolo (who was also married). Giancotto discovered them in a romantic compromise and killed them both, and thus they are in the Second Circle of Hell, locked eternally in the simulacrum of a passionate embrace, buffeted by torrential rains and blown about by stormy winds along with such other lustful luminaries as Helen of Troy and Cleopatra.

When Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky focused on this story, in 1876, he was 36 years old and gear-

ing up for a mid-life crisis himself: it would come the following year with his precipitous marriage (a step he was already considering as he worked on *Francesca da Rimini*, although by that time he hadn't started to focus on precisely whom he might marry) and his

IN SHORT

Born: May 7, 1840, in Votkinsk in the district of Viatka, Russia

Died: November 6, 1893, in St. Petersburg

Works composed and premiered:

Francesca da Rimini, Fantasy after Dante, composed late September or early October to November 17, 1876; dedicated to the composer Sergei Taneyev; premiered March 9, 1877 in Moscow, with Nikolai Rubinstein conducting. Symphony No. 6, composed February–August 1893; dedicated to Vladimir ("Bob") Lvovich Davidov, the composer's nephew; premiered October 28, 1893 at the Hall of Nobles in St. Petersburg, with the composer conducting

New York Philharmonic premieres and

most recent performances: *Francesca da Rimini*, premiered December 21, 1878, Adolph Neundorff, conductor (which marked the U.S. Premiere); most recent performance, January 16, 2007, Lorin Maazel, conductor. Symphony No. 6, premiered March 16, 1894, with Walter Damrosch conducting the New York Symphony (which would merge with the New York Philharmonic in 1928), the performance marked the U.S. Premiere; most recently played July 21, 2015, at Bravo! Vail in Colorado, Joshua Weilerstein, conductor

Estimated durations: *Francesca da Rimini*, ca. 28 minutes; Symphony No. 6, ca. 47 minutes

ensuing homosexual panic, meltdown, and escape to Switzerland with a young boyfriend in tow. Tchaikovsky at first envisioned *Francesca da Rimini* as an opera and made preliminary plans to use an existing libretto on the subject by the writer Konstantin Zvantsyev. But when Zvantsyev turned out to be a rabid Wagnerite and started making “music of the future-ish” demands about the opera to be, Tchaikovsky, who had had a mixed reaction to Wagner’s music during a visit to Bayreuth, rethought his plans and plotted a symphonic poem instead.

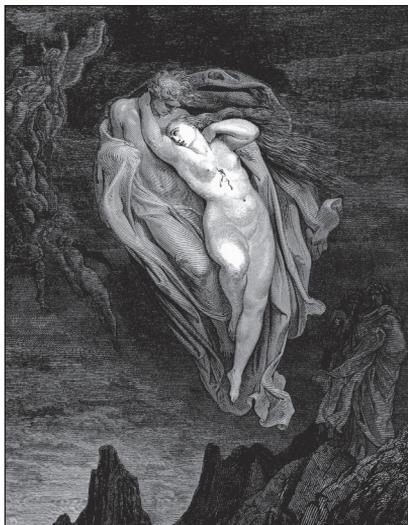
It really was a perfect choice for Tchaikovsky, who had already shown his sympathy

for literary sources with his Overture-Fantasy *Romeo and Juliet* and was, in any case, practically peerless in crafting musical expressions of the two principle emotional poles of the *Francesca* tale: passionate love and hopeless tragedy. It therefore comes as no surprise that the heart of this piece is the central section, which, through Francesca’s narrative, delves into the human drama of the situation. Nevertheless, Tchaikovsky’s depiction of the pelting rain and whirling wind of the Second Circle is also vivid when he trains his attention on scene-setting in an *Allegro vivo* section near the work’s opening and again at

The Story at a Glance

Tchaikovsky’s manuscript of *Francesca da Rimini* includes a prose program he wrote to correspond with his music, based on Dante’s poem:

Dante, accompanying the shade of Virgil, descends to the second circle of hell’s abyss. The air here is filled with groans, wails, and cries of despair. In the sepulchral gloom a storm blows up and rages. Furiously, the hellish whirlwind races along, bearing in its wild whirling the spirits of mortals whose reason in life was clouded by amorous passion. From the countless human souls spinning there, Dante’s attention is specifically drawn to the two lovely shades of Francesca and Paolo spinning in each other’s embrace. Shocked by the soul-searing sight of these two young shades, Dante summons them and asks them to relate the crime for which they have been prescribed so terrible a punishment. Dissolving in tears, the shade of Francesca tells her sad tale. She loved Paolo but was, against her will, given in marriage to the hateful brother of her beloved, the hunchbacked, deformed, jealous tyrant, Rimini. The bonds of a forced marriage could not drive from Francesca’s heart her tender passion for Paolo. Once they were reading together the romance of Lancelot. “We were alone,” Francesca narrates, “and were reading without apprehension. More than once we blanched, and our confused glances met. But one instant destroyed us both. When, finally, the fortunate Lancelot gained the first kiss of love, he, from whom nothing will now separate me, kissed my trembling mouth, and the book that had revealed to us for the first time the secret of love fell from our hands.” At that moment Francesca’s husband had entered unexpectedly and killed both her and Paolo with blows from his dagger. And, having said this, Francesca is again borne away in the embrace of her Paolo by the furiously and wildly raging whirlwind.



Francesca and Paolo in the Second Circle of Hell, one of Gustave Doré’s illustrations of The Divine Comedy, from which Tchaikovsky reportedly drew inspiration

the piece's conclusion. It was reported that he derived inspiration not only from Dante's poem but also from Gustave Doré's famous drawings illustrating that classic.

"I have written it with love," Tchaikovsky told his brother Modest, in a letter on October 26, 1876, "and the *love* seems to have come out respectably. As far as the whirlwinds are concerned, it would have been possible to make something corresponding more with Doré's illustration, but it didn't come out as I wanted." From the opening introduction, which Tchaikovsky characterized as being written "under the influence of the *Nibelungen*," through to the lovers' sudden departure at the end, the symphonic poem minutely depicts Dante's story, which the composer elaborated in a prose program he appended to his manuscript (see sidebar, page 33).

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 Tchaikovsky's **Symphony No. 6** was first heard, but barely. The composer's brother Modest proposed the subtitle *Pateticheskaiia* 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, but 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, enriched by divided violas, then with melancholy comments from the woodwinds, before breaking into a nervous *Allegro non troppo*. Tenderness, too, inhabits this 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 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 surely 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 (although suicide has been suggested — and endlessly debated). Three

weeks later, his final symphony received its second performance. "This time," Rimsky-Korsakov wrote, "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."

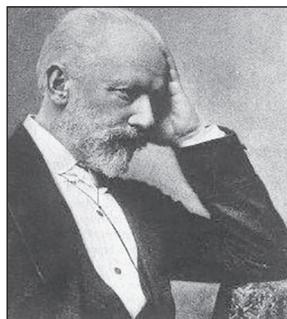
Instrumentation: *Francesca da Rimini* calls for three flutes (one doubling piccolo), two oboes and English horn, two clarinets, two bassoons, four horns, two cornets and two trumpets, three trombones, tuba, timpani, cymbals, bass drum, tam-tam, two harps, and strings. Symphony No. 6 employs three flutes (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.

Views and Reviews

Tchaikovsky's **Sixth Symphony** was not to everyone's taste. Surprisingly, the Viennese critic Eduard Hanslick, usually a devoted Tchaikovsky hater, chose to tolerate the piece. There was plenty to complain about, to be sure, such as the "disagreeable rhythm" of the movement in 5/4 meter, which he found "disturbing to listeners and players alike" and "superfluous, moreover, since the piece could be adapted to six-eight time without damage." But in the end he pronounced it an "original and intelligent composition which, despite unbeautiful, purely operatic characteristics and a merciless length, has made a strong impression."

Less open-minded was Gustav Mahler. According to his friend Natalie Bauer-Lechner, "he called it a shallow, superficial, distressingly homophonic work — no better than salon music." His interlocutor protested that at least the instrumental effects were delightful, and reported his response:

Even coloring, replied Mahler, should not really be the sort of thing he gives us here. His is fake, sand thrown in one's eyes! If you look more closely, there is precious little there. These rising and falling arpeggios, these meaningless sequences of chords, can't disguise the fundamental lack of invention and the emptiness. If you make a colored dot spin round an axis, it appears to be magnified into a shimmering circle. But the moment it comes to rest, it's the same old dot, which wouldn't tempt even the cat to play.



Tchaikovsky in 1893