

# Symphony No. 5 in E minor, Op. 64

## Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky

It should come as no surprise that Pyotr Ilyich 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 optimism: “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 span of four months. Tchaikovsky made a habit of keeping his principal patron, Nadezhda von Meck, informed about his compositions through detailed letters, and thanks to this ongoing correspondence a good deal of information is available 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 his patron 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 to 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; and yet the audience was enthusiastic. Predictably, Tchaikovsky decided the critics must be right. In December he wrote to 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.

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### In Short

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

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

**Work composed:** from May to August 14, 1888, mostly in Frolovskoe, outside Moscow, though conceptual sketches preceded his actual composition work by about a month

**World premiere:** November 17, 1888, in St. Petersburg, with the composer conducting the St. Petersburg Philharmonic Society

**New York Philharmonic premiere:** February 8, 1890, Theodore Thomas, conductor

**Most recent New York Philharmonic performance:** January 28, 2017, Semyon Bychkov, conductor

**Estimated duration:** ca. 46 minutes

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 considerable self-awareness; 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 composer employs an essentially late-Classical orchestra of modest proportions. Tchaikovsky was quite on target about "the management of form" being his weak suit; 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 one may hear as victorious but may just as easily sound ominous.

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

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## 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 somber clarinets at the piece's outset:



This would seem to represent 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 this "Fate" motif is transposed from the minor mode into the major in a gesture that sounds at least temporarily triumphant.