

PROGRAM NOTES

by Phillip Huscher

Piotr Tchaikovsky

Born May 7, 1840, Viatka, Russia.

Died November 18, 1893, Saint Petersburg, Russia.

Symphony No. 5 in E Minor, Op. 64

Tchaikovsky composed his Fifth Symphony between May and August 26, 1888, and conducted the first performance in Saint Petersburg on November 17 of that year. (Theodore Thomas, who would found the Chicago Orchestra two years later, introduced the work to America at a concert in New York on March 5, 1889.) The score calls for three flutes and piccolo, two oboes, two clarinets, two bassoons, four horns, two trumpets, three trombones and tuba, timpani, and strings. Performance time is approximately forty-five minutes.

The Chicago Symphony Orchestra's first subscription concert performances of Tchaikovsky's Fifth Symphony were given at the Auditorium Theatre on April 1 and 2, 1892, with Theodore Thomas conducting.

Ten years passed between Tchaikovsky's Fourth and Fifth symphonies—a decade which saw his international reputation grow as he finished *Eugene Onegin* and three other (less successful) operas, the Violin Concerto, the 1812 Overture, the Serenade for Strings, a second piano concerto, the Manfred Symphony, the A minor piano trio, and the *Capriccio italien*. As he began this symphony, Tchaikovsky feared his muse was exhausted. "I am dreadfully anxious to prove not only to others, but also to myself, that I am not yet played out as a composer," he said at the time. In the spring of 1888, Tchaikovsky had recently moved into a new house outside of Moscow, and as he was beginning this symphony he found great joy working in his garden; he wrote to his patroness, Nadezhda von Meck, that when he was "past composing" he might devote himself to growing flowers. Work on the new symphony was often rough going. "The beginning was difficult," he reported midsummer, "now, however, inspiration seems to have come." He later complained, "I have to squeeze it from my dulled brain." But by the end of the summer, when four months of intensive work had brought him to the last measures of the symphony's finale, he admitted that "it seems to me that I have not blundered, that it has turned out well."

Tchaikovsky's Fourth Symphony had been his answer to Beethoven's Fifth: it's a symphony of triumph over fate, and he explained its meaning in detailed correspondence with Mme von Meck. For his next symphony, Tchaikovsky again turned to the theme of fate, although this time he gave away little of the work's hidden meaning. As a motto theme, Tchaikovsky picked a phrase from Glinka's *A Life for the Tsar* which accompanies the words "turn not into sorrow." Before he began composing, he sketched a program for the work in his notebook, labeling the theme as "complete resignation before Fate," and describing the first movement as "doubts . . . reproaches against xxx." That xxx, like the cryptic Z that appears elsewhere in the same pages, refers, almost without doubt, to the homosexuality he dared not admit. (It remained a well-kept secret during his life. His friends didn't know what to make of the disastrous match that publicly passed for a marriage—lasting only weeks and driving the composer to attempt suicide—or of his one satisfying relationship with a woman, Nadezhda von Meck, whom he never met in fourteen years and couldn't bring himself to speak to the one time they accidentally passed on the street.)

The symphony opens with the motto theme quietly played by the clarinet (it returns later in the most dramatic form). The Allegro also begins with a gently moving theme in the clarinet, doubled by the bassoon. (Tchaikovsky launches this E minor melody from the lower C, rising a third to E, rather than from the lower fourth, B—the more predictable start, and the way many listeners incorrectly remember it.) This ultimately leads to the remote key of D major, where the violins introduce a lovely sighing theme,

delicately scored at first, then blossoming to encompass the full orchestra. The development section travels through many harmonic regions, but presents very little actual development, because Tchaikovsky's themes are full melodies, not easily dissected.

The Andante presents one of Tchaikovsky's most beloved themes, a horn melody so poignant and seductive that it tempts many listeners to overlook the eloquent strands the clarinet and oboe weave around it. The opening bars of quiet sustained chords begin in B minor and then swing around to D major—that unexpected tonal territory from the first movement—before the hushed entry of the horn. The lyrical flow is halted by the motto theme, first announced by the full orchestra over a fierce timpani roll midway through, and once again just before the end.

The third movement is a minor-key waltz; a livelier trio, with playful runs in the strings, also sounds uneasy, suggesting something sinister on the horizon. Perhaps it's the fateful motto theme, which sounds quietly in the low winds just before the dance is over. The finale opens with the motto, fully harmonized and in the major mode. This furiously driven movement has often been derided as overly bombastic, formulaic, and repetitive, although it has many delicate touches, including a high, singing theme in the winds. The tempo never eases, not even in the one moment of repose that is marked pianissimo and lightly scored. The motto theme sweeps through, once at a brisk speed, and then, near the end, leading a magnificent march. It's the main melody of the first movement, however, that comes rushing in to close the symphony.

Tchaikovsky conducted the first performance of the symphony in Saint Petersburg in November 1888 and introduced the work in Europe on a concert tour in early 1889. In Hamburg he met Brahms, who postponed his departure in order to hear his Russian colleague's latest symphony; Brahms liked what he heard, except for the finale.

Tchaikovsky was far from written out. Before he even finished this symphony, he began the fantasy overture *Hamlet*, and a few weeks later he started work on a new ballet about a sleeping beauty who is awakened with a prince's kiss.

Phillip Huscher is the program annotator for the Chicago Symphony Orchestra.

© Chicago Symphony Orchestra. All rights reserved. Program notes may be reproduced only in their entirety and with express written permission from the Chicago Symphony Orchestra.

These notes appear in galley files and may contain typographical or other errors. Programs subject to change without notice.