

Symphony No.2 in C minor, Op. 17 "Little Russian"

Allegro vivo
Andante marziale
Scherzo
Moderato assai

~

Peter Ilyich Tchaikovsky
Born 1840
Died 1893

õTruly there would be reason to go mad were it not for music.ö
ô Tchaikovsky

Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky's art sprang forth from Russian soil, yet, in his greatest creations, whether derived from bliss or melancholy, his music transported not only the Russian people, but all of humankind to the heights of beauty. Tchaikovsky was born in Votkinsk in May of 1840. His parents provided him with a good solid education, which included a music teacher. But his father, a mine inspector, didn't think music was a fit career. When Tchaikovsky was ten, the family moved to St. Petersburg. From the beginning, Tchaikovsky's personal life was full of turmoil. He was crushed when he lost his mother at age 14 and while in military boarding school, he threw himself into music to shield himself from the world. He listened to Mozart's *Don Giovanni*, and was so thrilled by what he heard; he decided right then and there to devote his life to music. He didn't dare share this with his father, whose agenda was for the boy to go to law school.

Trying his best to be the obedient son, Tchaikovsky agreed to study jurisprudence until he graduated at 19, becoming a government clerk. He stayed at his post until the age of 21, but could no longer see his way clear to act out of duty. He eagerly enrolled in a music school started by the great composer, Anton Rubinstein. This school was to become the St. Petersburg Conservatory. His father just shook his head and looked on as Tchaikovsky began to compose work after work. Eventually Tchaikovsky was hailed as the hope of Russia's musical future.

Personally, however, Tchaikovsky was suffering deeply. He was homosexual, and since this was completely unacceptable at the time, he often felt depressed. In 1877, he married a young female student who was in love with him. This proved disastrous, and the relationship quickly dissolved. Within a few short months of marriage, Tchaikovsky attempted suicide and endured a nervous breakdown.

But it was another woman, Nadezhda von Meck, who entered his life and gave the composer hope. They wrote to each other and she stated that she wanted to subsidize him without ever meeting him. Their relationship lasted fourteen years, providing Tchaikovsky with a feeling of peace of mind. His brother Modeste recalled years later, õThe Tchaikovsky of 1885 seemed a new man compared with the nervous and misanthropic Tchaikovsky of 1878.ö

Now that he possessed the freedom to devote himself entirely to composition, Tchaikovsky set to work in earnest. *The Symphony No. 4 in F minor* was the first of the

works written under the commission of this wealthy widow. But Tchaikovsky's romantic soul found its greatest outlet in his immensely popular ballet scores, notably *The Nutcracker* and *Swan Lake*. The composer was his own biggest critic, however, feeling that he was unable to understand the concepts of musical form.

The Russian element is very strong in his music, and occasionally he makes use of homegrown folk songs in his works. However, he does not plan this – it happens spontaneously. His music is sentimental and shows a flair for melody seemingly unmatched by his Russian contemporaries. Tchaikovsky wrote in every genre and had successes in each; works for the stage, chamber music, piano and violin pieces, lyric songs, and of course symphonic masterpieces.

In the early 1880s, Tchaikovsky was much less prolific. He actually wrote very little. However, after a trip overseas, he was enticed to start composing again. In 1884, he wrote his *Manfred Symphony*, in '88 the *Fifth Symphony*, and the next few years would be filled with ballet scores. The beginning of the 90s held in store a visit to the United States. In 1893, he worked on his *Sixth Symphony*, which was given the nickname the "Pathétique" by his brother. Tchaikovsky died soon after the premiere of this symphony, but as to how, the jury is still out. Depending on what source one reads, a great composer whom Stravinsky called "the most Russian of us all" died from either cholera after accidentally drinking contaminated water, or by deliberately taking his own life. Although the facts surrounding his death are open for debate, there is no doubt that on that cold November day, St. Petersburg and the world mourned the great master's passing.

It is in Tchaikovsky's symphonies that he most openly expresses his emotions. For evidence of this, we need to look no further than the first movement of the *Pathétique*, which practically oozes yearning and sadness. However, there is a symphony that truly is an exception to the rule. It is his *Symphony No. 2 in C minor, op. 17, "The Little Russian,"* which we will hear this evening. Tchaikovsky stayed with his sister at her estate near Kiev in the summer of 1872. There he heard simple folk songs sung in the streets. In this work, he utilizes three Ukrainian folk tunes (the Russians referred to the Ukraine as Little Russia) in this work. Composed in 1872 and extensively revised in 1879, this music is positively upbeat in comparison with his other symphonies. Interestingly, although Tchaikovsky approved of the title "Little Russian," it was actually a friend of his who came up with the title.

The first movement opens and closes in a haunting fashion with music originally from the song "Down by the Mother Volga," played first by a solo French horn, and then by the bassoon. When Tchaikovsky builds a symphony, he works his own distinctive magic. Instead of changing the original melodies, he repeats them several times, and with each repetition, the texture of the work changes by adding new elements to the accompaniment. So, the melodies don't change per se – but the intricacies of the orchestration seem to suggest to the audience that the music is somehow transformed. This opening movement finally shifts into *Allegro* and Tchaikovsky breaks the folk melody into short melodic fragments. This provides a sense of agitation, making the music sound as if it needs to catch its breath. Then Tchaikovsky employs one of his characteristic techniques – he tosses passages back and forth from one section to another, providing timbral interest. When he is satisfied with this approach, he ends the movement with a slow version of the folk tune by the solo horn and then the bassoon.

The second movement, marked *Andante marciale* opens with a pianissimo timpani, which serves as an accompaniment throughout the movement. On top of this, he ingeniously weaves together two different melodies from a bridal march in his discarded opera *Undine*. The march has an elegant, lilting and confident spirit. The other theme is lyrical and melancholy. The themes work their magic until the movement closes with the ever-faithful heartbeat of the timpani. Ah, sweet closure.

The *Scherzo* third movement is highly chromatic and has tremendous rhythmic drive. The unstable meters create a tension, which begs the listener to find out what happens next. "Scherzo" means joke. The folk song "Spin, oh my Spinner" is the melodic material here, but the accented notes that accompany it seem almost inappropriate: thus, the musical joke. In contrast, the brief Trio section in the center of the movement features a vivacious folk-like tune in the woodwinds.

It is in the fourth movement that Tchaikovsky truly dons his true nationalistic colors. On hearing the slow introduction to the *Symphony's* finale, lovers of music might initially accuse Tchaikovsky of plagiarizing Mussorgsky's *The Great Gate of Kiev* from *Pictures at an Exhibition*. This is because the theme upon which Tchaikovsky and Mussorgsky both based their works, the popular Ukrainian folk song called "The Crane" is the connection between the two. But wait. Tchaikovsky's version turns into a swift dance with the accent on the offbeat. This shifting the accent of the beat away from where it is expected to fall, is the playful way Tchaikovsky keeps up his good humor throughout the movement. First, we dance softly, and then as instruments are layered one on top of the other, the whirling escalates. The second theme in the strings provides a breather from the action, and Tchaikovsky puts the two themes together in the development section. Then we hear the gong usher in the coda and very regal sounding finish, complete with cymbal crashes and booming brass fanfares. Tchaikovsky loved and was very proud of this movement and his colleagues of the Russian nationalist movement definitely concurred. We certainly hope you give tonight's rendition of this great work a thumbs up.

ô Program Notes by Claudia Drosen