

Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky (1840-1893)

Symphony No. 4 in F minor, Op. 36

- i. **Andante sostenuto – Moderato con anima**
- ii. **Andantino in modo di canzone**
- iii. **Scherzo: Allegro**
- iv. **Finale: Allegro con fuoco**

The trials and tribulations Tchaikovsky suffered in 1877 have been mythologised but there is no doubt that his Fourth Symphony is closely bound up with the emotional havoc the composer was experiencing at this time. Tchaikovsky's homosexuality was tormenting him and was becoming the subject of increasing public comment. In an act of desperation, Tchaikovsky embarked upon a rushed, loveless marriage with an adoring student, Antonia Milyukova, to avoid arousing suspicion. Unsurprisingly, it was a complete disaster – they married in the summer of 1877 and within months he had attempted suicide and had a complete nervous breakdown. They were estranged by the autumn.

It was this same year that Tchaikovsky began his correspondence with Nadezhda von Meck, a rich widow who first became aware of Tchaikovsky at the beginning of 1877 after hearing *The Tempest*. The pair wrote letters of startling intimacy to each other for 14 years, Meck providing Tchaikovsky with both emotional support and financial security. As was their agreement, they never once met. According to Tchaikovsky's biographer David Brown, 'for each the other remained a fantasy figure, unspoilt by the disenchantment of reality'.

Tchaikovsky had begun work on his Fourth Symphony in the spring of 1877 but as well as his marriage ordeal, he got side-tracked with the idea for an opera based on a Pushkin play – *Eugene Onegin* and the Fourth Symphony were the two works created during the most turbulent period of Tchaikovsky's life, yet are among the finest works he wrote. The Symphony was premièred on 22 February 1878 in Moscow with Nikolai Rubenstein conducting. It received its British première in June 1893 with Tchaikovsky conducting when the composer received an honorary doctorate from the University of Cambridge alongside Max Bruch and Camille Saint-Saëns.

The Fourth Symphony became a vessel into which Tchaikovsky poured his deepest artistic and emotional feelings. Whether or not its content is autobiographical remains controversial, not least because of a letter Tchaikovsky wrote to Meck in which he told her that the Symphony had a programme: 'I will tell you – and you alone – the meaning of the entire work'. Over the course of 1,000 words, Tchaikovsky describes the four movements and their meaning in what is one of the most famous letters ever penned by a composer.

'The Introduction is the kernel of the whole symphony, without question its main idea. This is Fate, the force of destiny, which ever prevents our pursuit of happiness from reaching its goal, which jealously

stands watch lest our peace and well-being be full and cloudless, which ... constantly, ceaselessly poisons our souls. It is invincible, inescapable. One can only resign oneself and lament fruitlessly'. The despair and utter hopelessness is difficult to ignore, even if it may have been slightly exaggerated by Tchaikovsky to impress his benefactor. The first movement of the Fourth Symphony is a giant of the symphonic repertoire – it is almost as long as the other three movements put together and casts a long shadow over the rest of the work. The 'Fate' theme returns again and again, intruding and sweeping aside everything in its wake. In Tchaikovsky's words: 'There is no refuge. We are buffeted about by this sea until it seizes us and pulls us down to the bottom'.

For Tchaikovsky, the second movement expresses 'that melancholy feeling that arises in the evening when you are sitting alone weary from work ... Many things flit through your memory ... It is both sad and somehow sweet to lose oneself in the past'. A haunting, seemingly unending melody first played by the oboe is the leitmotif of this 'melancholy'; amidst all the emotional and technical complexity of the Fourth Symphony, this movement shows us Tchaikovsky's ability to evoke pathos from the most disarming of melodies.

The third movement feels curiously out of place, detached from the emotional weight of the first two movements and the exhilarating pace of the finale. According to Tchaikovsky, there is no definite programmatic element: 'The soul is neither happy nor sad. You are not thinking of anything; you give free rein to your imagination and for some reason it has begun to paint curious pictures'. Each section of the orchestra – strings, woodwind and brass – is given their own characteristic idea which Tchaikovsky then begins to sow together. It is as close as we are brought to a scene from a Tchaikovsky ballet.

'If you cannot find reasons for happiness in yourself, look at others. Get out among the people. See what a good time they have, surrendering themselves completely to joyous feelings'. In his note to Mme von Meck, Tchaikovsky describes a cathartic conclusion to the Fourth Symphony, almost resigning oneself to a blissful haze of happiness. The second theme, first heard on the woodwind near the beginning, is a famous Russian folksong: 'In the field a little birch tree stood'. But the attempts at nostalgia and affirmation are eventually thwarted as the inexorable 'Fate' theme returns towards the end of the movement. A whirlwind coda tries to reclaim a mood of ecstasy but rather than being triumphant, the Symphony's ending is hysteric, a futile attempt to escape the throes of Fate.