

Merely an Echo: Tchaikovsky's Symphony No. 4 in F minor

The brass, sounding out powerfully, calls into the empty air. Higher brass, echoing the first. "That fateful force which prevents the impulse to happiness from attaining its goal," as Tchaikovsky referred to the recurring theme of the first movement. This is certain to set the tone of the entire piece.

Piotr (Peter) Ilyich Tchaikovsky was born in Votkinsk in Viatka Province in 1840. In 1850, he began his long stay at the School of Jurisprudence, a boarding school. During his stay, he began to compose, but these first attempts did not lead to much at that moment. After graduation at age 19, he began work as a clerk in the Ministry of Justice. In the autumn of 1861, Tchaikovsky began attending classes offered by the Russian Musical Society. In September of 1862, Tchaikovsky continued his study of music as one of the first students of the newly opened St. Petersburg Conservatory. It was in April of 1863 that he decided to devote his life to music, and thus left his position at the Ministry of Justice. He spent the next three years of his life at the St. Petersburg Conservatory, studying and supporting himself by giving private lessons. Thus began the alteration of his goals, from a life of law to a life of music.

Tchaikovsky is responsible for many extraordinary pieces, ranging from his three famous ballets (*The Nutcracker*, *The Sleeping Beauty*, and *Swan Lake*) to cantatas to his six symphonies. One of these many notable pieces is the *Fourth Symphony in F minor, Opus 36*. This was the first of his mature symphonic works (Poznansky 1998, 30). In 1876, he received a commission from Nadezhda Filaretovna von Meck, a patroness whom he was never to meet, but a financial supporter that allowed him to concentrate on composing. In his letters to Nadezhda, a woman he looked to

as a maternal figure, he described the theme of his opening movement as “a force which, like the sword of Damocles, hangs perpetually over our heads and is always embittering the soul” (Warrack 1974, 23). As one listens to the opening of the first movement, a hanging, almost omniscient cloud of brass notes can be felt overhead. Tchaikovsky describes the theme of his second movement could be described as an expression of yet “another phase of depression.” Even the third movement was that of “strange, wild and disjointed” images. However, the fourth movement changed tones, carrying a theme described as “a picture of festive merriment of the people” (Lieberman, 1998).

So how did he continue such a sad tone throughout the first three movements (totaling over 32 minutes)? It all began during his stint at the Ministry of Justice. He was constantly in the pursuit of pleasure and often engaged in “affairs and amorous adventures with members of his set, until the threat of homosexual scandal...sobered him up” (Poznansky 1998, 8). In a letter to his brother, Modest, where he was talking about the first movement of the *Fourth Symphony* in the same manner that he did to Nadezhda, he spoke of his fear that his homosexual activities would be disclosed. This problem frightened him. In March of 1877, Antonina Miliukova, one of his pupils at the Moscow Conservatory, sent Peter a letter professing her love for him. This was not uncommon, as it seems many of his pupils had feelings for him (Young 1968, 39). They began communicating by letter, and in May, she offered him her “hand and heart.” In one final letter, she threatened to kill herself if they did not marry, and in the latter days of May, Tchaikovsky and Antonina finally met. According to Ponansky, it is believed that this threat had nothing to do with Tchaikovsky’s decision:

...in the context of the entire letter, this “threat” seems to be no more than a device in the tradition of sentimental models from so-called letter books that were popular at the time and contained samples of fictional letters for all occasions.

Later on in the month, Tchaikovsky and Antonina finally met. A few days later, Tchaikovsky proposed to Antonina, but made sure that she knew the conditions of their marriage. He told her that she would only receive the love of a friend. It is perhaps best described, coldly but truthfully, in a letter he wrote to Nadezhda von Meck:

When we met [for the first time in person] I told her again that I could only offer gratitude and sympathy in exchange for her love...[I] told her frankly that I could not love her, but that I would be a devoted and grateful friend...To live thirty-seven years with an innate antipathy to matrimony, and then by force of circumstance, to find oneself engaged to a woman with whom one is not in the least in love—is very painful...I told her what she could expect from me, and what she must not count upon receiving.

However, Antonina agreed to these terms. This was surely a sign of a bad future. Besides the fact that the original reason for the marriage was bad, he also soon discovered that he did not even like Antonina at all, not to mention her family and friends. In July, he went to stay with his sister for one and a half months, and then returned to his wife in September. Twelve days later, he left Antonina for good. He told her that he was summoned to St. Petersburg on an errand, and from there he had to go on an extended vacation to recover from a nervous breakdown. These were lies,

but helped him get out of a horrible situation. Fleeing from this marriage also helped him come to terms with his sexuality.

He drew from this miserable experience and incorporated it into his work; thus was the depressing tones of the *Fourth Symphony*. According to Warrack:

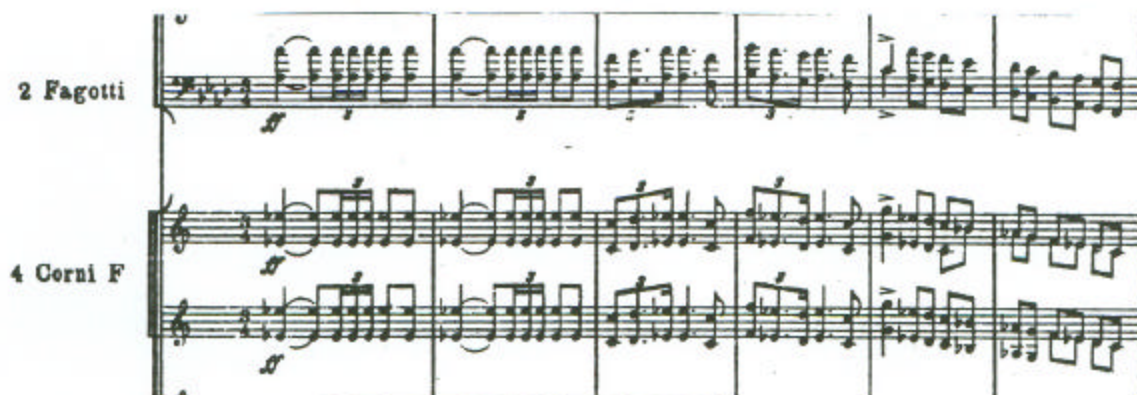
The crisis...strengthened the conviction that some sinister force of fate really did threaten his life; and it was this, coupled with his need to confide his emotions to music, which shaped his *Fourth Symphony* and enabled him at last to discover the symphonic method which matched his temperament to his talents.

It was in a letter to von Meck that he admitted this symphony to be programmatic. He based his idea for this symphony on ideas gathered from Beethoven's *Fifth Symphony*—"namely, the triumph of the sensibility over the attacks of Fate" (Warrack 1974, 24). This allowed the symphony's goal to be accomplished more successfully, because he used the dramatic idea of fate, rather than systematically approaching it strictly as an attempt at forming a symmetrical piece of music. This theme of Fate not only provided material for individual movements, it also linked them together.

As described in his letter to von Meck, the first movement of the *Fourth Symphony* was like a force that hangs overhead. The force, being Fate, always looming over us. Fate is represented by the call of the brass, solo at the beginning [Figure 1], and recurring throughout the first movement. Throughout much of the first movement, a pulse of brass instruments is heard, either quietly or abruptly and unexpected. That's when the simile to Fate can best be understood. In one case, it is a repetitive pulse in the background, implying that Fate is always there, but

sometimes does not interrupt life. In another case, it has a definite presence, engulfing the body, much as the loud brass calls engulf the piece. During the middle of the movement, it establishes a somewhat happy tone and the brass calls are not heard, perhaps implying that the “sinister fate” is not interfering with Tchaikovsky’s life at the moment. Soon, however, fate returns, and all of the overlaying lines seem to form an organized chaos, perhaps where his life was being thrown in a whirlwind. Lasting almost twenty minutes, the first movement is fairly repetitive, but “the encounter with rhythmic tension and variation makes Tchaikovsky’s use of repetition seem not so tiresome” (Botstein 1998, 105). In addition to these rhythmic variations, Tchaikovsky also utilizes a wide range of dynamics in order to not only vary recurring parts, but to also steadily increase the intensity. All of these musical manipulations “earned him the reputation of being the master of psychological narration through instrumental music” (Botstein 1998, 105).

Figure 1. (I, opening)



The second movement continued with a slow, unhappy tone. The almost lamenting call of the solo oboe, with a quiet pizzicato accompaniment, brings a sense of depression into the piece, the mind seeming to be swimming in a sea of thoughts. It is then repeated by the string section, and begins to gain a feeling of positivity, as if the mind finds a glimmer of hope [Figure 2].

Figure 2. (II, mm. 40-49)

It returns to the opening theme and then makes its way back to the uplifting section. It then enters a dance-like pattern, and eventually returns to the sad portion. It seems as if the mind cannot escape this feeling. Joy is soon forgotten because sadness has returned. It would be suitable to describe this movement as bitter sweet. Tchaikovsky describes it, as cited by Warrack:

This is that melancholy feeling which comes in the evening when one sits alone, tired from work, having picked up a book but let it fall from one's hands. A whole host of memories appears. And one is sad because so much is gone, past, and it is pleasant to remember one's youth....There were happy moments, when young blood pulsed and life was good. There were gloomy moments, too, irreplaceable losses. All that is indeed somewhere far off. And it is sad and somehow sweet to bury oneself in the past.

The third movement changes pace. It is quite a fast movement, almost entirely of pizzicato strings, with sections of joining brass and woodwinds. The oboe tune represents a drunken peasant [Figure 3].

Figure 3. (III, mm. 129-144)

The image displays a musical score for measures 130 and 140. The top system features the Oboe (Ob.) and Bassoon (Fg.) parts. Measure 130 is marked with a box containing the number '130'. The tempo is indicated as 'Meno mosso'. The bottom system features the Flute (Fl.), Oboe (Ob.), Clarinet (Cl.), and Bassoon (Fg.) parts. Measure 140 is marked with a box containing the number '140'. The score shows a transition from a woodwind ensemble to a brass and percussion ensemble.

This section eventually flows into the brass and percussion, representing a military band. These are, at times, played simultaneously, and then the pizzicato eventually returns. At the end of the movement, all three come together in a “free-for-all.” Much of these descriptions don’t seem to make sense, and that is for good reason. Tchaikovsky again describes this movement as cited by Warrack:

It consists of capricious arabesques, elusive apparitions that pass through the imagination when one has drunk a little wine and feels the first stages of intoxication....The imagination is liberated, and for some reason sets off painting strange pictures. Among them one remembers the picture of a roistering peasant and a street song. Then somewhere in the distance a military parade passes.

Then comes the fourth movement, the Finale. This movement opens up with a sense of triumph or celebration. A fortissimo blast rings from all instruments as they play the opening theme [Figure 4]. Tchaikovsky described it as “a picture of festive merriment of the people.”

Figure 4. (IV, opening)

The image displays a musical score for the opening of the fourth movement, titled "Allegro con fuoco". The score is arranged in two systems. The first system includes staves for Piccolo, 2 Flauti, 2 Oboi, 2 Clarinetti B, and 2 Fagotti. The second system includes staves for Violini I and II, Viole, Violoncelli, and Contrabassi. The tempo is marked "Allegro con fuoco" and the dynamic is "ff" (fortissimo). The music features a rhythmic pattern of eighth notes, with some instruments playing sixteenth notes. The Piccolo and Flauti parts have a melodic line with slurs, while the other instruments provide a rhythmic accompaniment. The score is written in a key signature of one flat and common time.

For the majority of the movement, it sounds as if peace and happiness was finally found. The music begins to shift out of this state, alternating between light-hearted string runs and grave bellows of the brass. Slowly, the horrible fury blasted by the brass in the first movement builds up and the theme of Fate returns [The rhythm is the same as Figure 1, but has been shifted to other instruments]. It rings through, and completely changes the mood of the movement. Fate has

returned to remind him that it is still there, looming over his head, despite the joy of the people around him. However, the clouds seem to be parting once again. Merriment has returned, perhaps telling him to join the festival to take his mind off his miserable experience. Fate seems to try to push its way back into the music, but the brass fury can barely be heard. It seems as if Fate no longer has complete control over him. Perhaps there is a way to live other than miserably. As cited by Warrack, Tchaikovsky says:

If you find no cause for joy within yourself, look for it in others. Go to the people. Look, they know how to enjoy themselves, giving themselves up to undivided feelings of pleasure...Scarcely has one forgotten oneself and been carried away at the sight of someone else's pleasure than indefatigable Fate returns again and reminds you of yourself. But others pay no heed to you...Reproach yourself and do not say that all the world is sad. Simple but strong joys do exist. Rejoice in others' rejoicing. To live is still bearable.

The finale of this symphony is often criticized, and there are two common complaints. The first is that critics believe that the reappearance of Fate as a theme is a "serious error of construction". The second criticism is that he poorly adapts the folk song "In the Field Stood a Birch Tree". This is the second theme of the finale. The finale is written in common time, but the folk song was written in $\frac{3}{4}$ time. Tchaikovsky added a beat at the end of each measure, which critics believed was unsuitable (Zajaczkowski 1987, 231).

Tchaikovsky dedicated the *Fourth Symphony* to Nadezhda von Meck, whom he considered his best friend. Throughout the years, she was his support, emotionally and financially. It was from her that he learned how the first performance of the *Fourth Symphony* was received. She told

him, by telegram, that it was successful, even though the orchestra in Moscow was not that good (Strutte 1981, 77).

It is no doubt that Tchaikovsky put himself into the *Fourth Symphony*. Throughout the entire composition, the listener can hear the sadness, the confusion, the misery, and the depression that Tchaikovsky was going through. He suffered through the anxiety of fearing his sexuality would be exposed. He was involved in a marriage that was not only impulsive, but that was, at least for him, emotionally fake. There was obviously more to his misery than these factors, because the writing started before the marriage was even a consideration. “I was down in the dumps last winter when the symphony was in the writing, and it is a faithful echo of what I was going through at that time” (Minibayeva 1998, 168). Tchaikovsky’s writing was emotional, and a case where his art was imitating his life.

Works Cited

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