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Tchaikovsky Symphony 6

"Pathétique"

in B minor Op. 74

Oslo Philharmonic Orchestra
Mariss Jansons, Conductor

- I – Adagio – Allegro non troppo (17:52)
- II – Allegro con grazia (7:25)
- III – Allegro molto vivace (8:18)
- IV – Finale: Adagio lamentoso (9:40)

TT = 43:30

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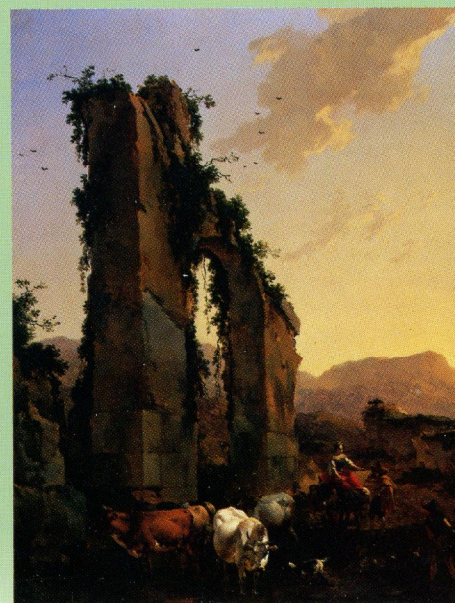
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Peter Ilyich Tchaikovsky (1840-1893)

The composer's death at St Petersburg a mere nine days after conducting a none-too-successful premiere of his *Symphonie pathétique*, as he titled it, imparted a tragic aura to the work right from the start. It was even said then that the music reflected a conscious premonition of death on Tchaikovsky's part, and although it was officially put out that he died after drinking impure water during a cholera epidemic prevalent at the time, present evidence inclines to the belief that he did indeed take his own life to avoid being disgraced by a public scandal of homosexual involvement.

Tchaikovsky was then aged 53, the most honoured and celebrated of Russian composers, and with an international reputation. In the Summer before he died he paid his third visit to Britain, to conduct a concert for the Philharmonic Society in London, and to receive a Doctor's degree in music from Cambridge University (also conferred at the same time on Boito, Bruch, Saint-Saëns and Grieg, although the last-named was not present), and by this time the Sixth Symphony was already in short score awaiting orchestration.

It was his second attempt at a symphony within 12 months. Sketches from the previous year for a work in E-flat found their way instead into the one-movement Piano Concerto No 3, Op 75, and a separate Adagio and Finale, Op 79, for piano and orchestra (they were all reconstructed back into a symphony in the 1950s by Semyon Bogatiryov, and so published and performed in the USSR). Having discarded those ideas, Tchaikovsky seems to have overcome some creative crisis in his mind and fresh thoughts began to flow.

To his nephew, Vladimir Davidov, he wrote that he had 'the idea of writing a programme symphony, but to a programme that should remain an enigma for everyone but myself: let them try to guess it! I intend to call it simply "Programme Symphony". It is full of subjective feeling, so much so that as I was mentally composing it during the journey (home from Odessa) I frequently shed tears. As soon as I arrived I set to work with such ardour that in four days the first movement was done and the rest clearly thought out in my head . . .'

In the same letter he added that he intended several innovations of form, and mentioned that 'the finale, for instance, is to be not a noisy allegro but a long adagio'. He expressed his delight that his creative force was not as spent as he feared. From the time of his Fourth Symphony (1877), which marked his recovery from the serious mental breakdown that followed his disastrous marriage, Tchaikovsky's music became more deeply subjective in emotional character – a form of self-revelation, offering not only his heart on his sleeve but his soul in his hand.

The great Russian literature of his time made much of themes involving psychological analysis before this was codified into theory and practice by the Viennese specialists. Especially is this true of Dostoyevsky, whom Tchaikovsky in his youth thought talked 'very foolishly' on musical matters, but whose work he later came to admire. His own later music, particularly in symphonic form, could be said to resemble a Dostoyevsky character in its desire to strip the emotional soul naked, and not least the Symphony that was to end his life's work.

He finished the full score by the end of August 1893, when he wrote again to Davidov: 'I consider this Symphony the best thing I have ever done. In any case, it is the most deeply felt'. In October it was played through by students of the orchestral class at the Moscow Conservatory (where Tchaikovsky once taught). He then took it to St Petersburg for rehearsals, and was unhappy that the orchestral players did not seem impressed by it. Their coolness may have inhibited his conducting of the premiere on 28 October. A few days later he was taken ill, and he died on 6 November.

On the day after the premiere Tchaikovsky asked his brother, Modest, if he could think of a more suitable title than 'Programme Symphony'. Modest first suggested 'Tragic', but this was turned down. His next suggestion was the present one, which Tchaikovsky accepted; he later changed his mind, but it appeared on the first published score. It should be realised, however, that 'pathetic' in present-day English has a different connotation from what was then intended, the Russian *pateticheskoy* (and its French equivalent) being closer to the Greek *pathos* in its original sense of 'suffering'.

A slow introduction is begun by a dark, lugubrious theme emerging from the depths of the orchestral strings on the bassoon, climbing slowly and painfully, and only gradually moving into the home key of B minor. At the change of tempo to Allegro, the subject is at once taken up agitatedly by the strings and extended to become the first theme of a sonata structure. The contrast is provided by the yearning, romantic melody introduced by the cellos, with a counter-melody from flute and bassoon to enrich it.

The development of these ideas begins explosively and continues in violent dynamic contrasts of loud and soft: Tchaikovsky extends the usual range of dynamic markings in the score from *ffff* in several places to *ppppp* for the bassoon at the end of the lyrical second theme. Restless, syncopated rhythms persist, and the yearning theme becomes dominant before being given a solemn burial.

Two intermezzo-type movements now follow, the first a 'limping waltz' which acquires a slightly feverish and macabre quality from being written in 5/4 time instead of 3/4, an irregular and unusual metre already anticipated by Tchaikovsky in his 'Sapphire' solo for the Jewel Fairies in the last Act of *The Sleeping Beauty* (1890). In the darker central section a bitter-sweet melody is accompanied by relentlessly repeated notes on basses, bassoons and timpani.

Much of the accumulated doubt and gloom is dispelled at this point by the third movement, a sequence of brilliant march-like variations developed from a few phrases and contrasts of tone-colour. It seems to promise a triumphant outcome, but the mood is dramatically dispelled by the grief-laden lamentations that begin the finale. Now the composer seems to echo Masha in Chekov's *The Seagull*: 'I am in mourning for my life'.

The first despairing phrases are answered by a more consoling theme in the major key, marked to be played 'with gentleness and devotion', but it cannot prevent the earlier grief from returning in still more anguished intensity. Even the consoling theme is overcome by this, so that its recall is changed into a woeful minor key. The music grows weaker, sinks lower and finally loses itself in soft, solemn chords of

trombones and tuba, ending what Tchaikovsky had virtually composed as his own epitaph.

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The Oslo Philharmonic Orchestra can trace its roots back to the last century to the period of Edvard Grieg and Johan Svendsen. Grieg was actually one of the founders and first conductors of the orchestra, which was established in 1871. This was a period of cultural growth and activity in Norway, when the authors Henrik Ibsen and Bjørnstjerne Bjørnson and the painters Adolph Tidemann and Hans Gude became well known and the first collections of Norwegian folk music were published.

The orchestra became permanently established as an independent organization in 1919, when its conductor was Georg Schneevoigt. Later artistic directors were Ignaz Neumark, Jose Eibenschütz, Issay Dobrowen, Odd Gruner-Hegge, Olav Kielland and Øivin Fjeldstad. Over the last 20 years the orchestra has gone through a tremendous artistic growth and achieved a particular reputation for the fine quality and tone of the wind and brass sections. A number of outstanding conductors have been instrumental in its development: Herbert Blomstedt (1962-68), Miltiades Caridis (1969-75), Okko Kamu (1975-79) and Mariss Jansons (from 1979). The working facilities have also been greatly improved with the completion of the Oslo Concert Hall in 1977, a multi-million dollar complex which is now the home of the orchestra and where it gives more than 60 concerts a year. It has made a number of recordings for various companies and been on tour in Europe, Britain and the U.S.A., receiving unanimous praise from major critics.

Mariss Jansons is chief conductor of the Oslo Philharmonic Orchestra and under his leadership the orchestra has thrived greatly and reached a new artistic level and achieved some outstanding interpretations. In 1982 Jansons and the orchestra received the Norwegian 'Grammy' Award – Spellemannsprisen – for their recording of works by Grieg and in 1983 Jansons received the Norwegian music critics' award for his interpretation of Shostakovich's Symphony No. 7.

Marriss Jansons was born in Riga in 1943 and trained at the Leningrad Music Conservatory, studying violin, viola, piano and conducting. After his graduation in 1969 he continued his studies at the Vienna Music Academy under Hans Swarovsky and also in Salzburg under Herbert von Karajan. He became internationally known when he was among the prize/winners in the Herbert von Karajan competition in Berlin in 1971. Later that year he was appointed assistant to the legendary Jevgeny Mravinsky of the Leningrad Philharmonic.

He is at present conductor of the Leningrad Philharmonic and he conducted the Moscow State Orchestra on its tour of England and Northern Ireland in Autumn 1983 as well as the Oslo Philharmonic on its English tour in the Spring the same year. He has also conducted the major orchestras of 22 different countries.

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