
Piotr Ilych Tchaikovskiy

His Life, Times and Music



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Tchaikovsky's Life

Have you heard of Peter Tchaikovsky? Well, if you haven't heard of him perhaps you know his music. Tchaikovsky wrote the music for some of ballet's most popular stories, like *The Nutcracker*, *Romeo and Juliet* and *Swan Lake*.

The Early Years in Votkinsk

If you look closely at your map of Russia, the largest country in the world, you will find a mountain range called the Urals. It is here in the foothill of the Urals, that we must go, to a bright yellow mansion at the water's edge, in the town of Votkinsk, to find the early childhood home of Peter Ilych Tchaikovsky. It is here that he was born on May 7, 1840.

Unlike the families of some other famous composers, the Tchaikovsky family members were not particularly noteworthy, either for their abilities or for their interest in music. Although it seems that young Peter's grandfather had something of a reputation among the local townspeople as a faith healer! Ilya Petrovich, Tchaikovsky's father, was an influential citizen in Votkinsk. He was a magistrate, and lived on a large estate with many serfs working for him. He even had his own private army of 100 Cossacks!

Tchaikovsky's mother, Alexandra, was Ilya Petrovich's second wife. He had married her when she was just 20 years old, after the death of his first wife. It was Alexandra who was responsible for bringing music into the lives of the Tchaikovsky family, hosting musical soirees in their Votkinsk home.

Tchaikovsky adored his mother. All his life, he was haunted by the memory of her large, beautiful hands. "Such hands do not exist nowadays and never will again," he said. Sadly for Tchaikovsky, Alexandra proved to be a rather cold and distant woman. She was self-absorbed, concerned about her position in Votkinsk society, and not given to hugs, kisses and other physical shows of affection to her children. She hated life in the small town, and wanted only to return to St. Petersburg.

Tchaikovsky had a half-sister, Zinaida, the daughter of Ilya Petrovich and his first wife; an older brother, Nikolay; a younger sister, Alexandra whom he loved and who was to be a stabilizing force in his life, a younger brother, Ippolit; and twin brothers, Modest and Anatol, with whom he was also to enjoy a close relationship.

Fanny

In 1843, inspired by her love of French culture, Tchaikovsky's mother hired a governess to assist with the children's education. Fanny Dürback, a 22-year-old French Protestant, was to become a major influence in the life of the young composer. She recognized his sensitivity and giftedness, calling him "un enfant de verre" (child of glass). Fanny recalled that as a child, Peter's clothes "were always in disorder. Either he had stained them in his absentmindedness, or buttons were missing, or his hair was only half-brushed." She exercised a wholesome and calming influence on him, although she worried that the obsession with music that he showed at such an early age was unhealthy. She preferred that he read books or listen to stories.

A Soft-Hearted Child

Peter was a softhearted little boy. One day he disappeared from home and nobody could find him. It turned out he'd been going from door to door in town, trying to find a home for the last kitten in a litter born to a cat belonging to one of his father's serfs.

Russia Above All

It was at this time too that his strong love for all things Russian began to appear. Fanny saw him with an atlas open in front of him, kissing Russia while spitting on all the other countries around it. Fanny scolded him, reminding him that these other countries, while not Russia, were still full of human beings, and that she herself had come from France. Peter replied, "Oh, but Fanny...didn't you see that I was covering France with my arm?"

Musical Beginnings

When he was only three years old, Tchaikovsky began to show a strong interest in music. "I started to compose as soon as I knew what music was," he once said. In fact he did produce his first composition when he was only four years old, with some help from his two-year-old sister Alexandra (Sasha). Their little song was called *Our Mama in St. Petersburg*.

And then one day Ilya Petrovich, Peter's father, brought home an orchestrion. An orchestrion was a type of barrel organ with a large number of pipes of various lengths and sizes designed to represent the instruments of an orchestra. The Tchaikovsky family's orchestrion could play airs from Bellini, Donizetti, Weber, Rossini and Mozart, in particular highlights from Mozart's great opera *Don Giovanni*.

Peter felt that he "owed his first musical impressions to this instrument." He was particularly fond of *Don Giovanni*, and attributed to Mozart the fact that "I have devoted my life to music. He gave me the impulse to all my efforts, and made me love it above all else in the world." By the time he was six, Peter had got into the habit of rushing from the orchestrion to the piano and picking out the tunes he had heard, with increasing skill.

Once when Peter's parents entertained a Polish pianist who gave a concert for the guests. Peter insisted on sitting at the piano, and played from memory the two Chopin mazurkas the pianist had performed. The Polish pianist complimented the little boy, calling him a "promising musician."

On another occasion, Peter fled from the room, much to the surprise of Fanny and his parents who thought Peter would be pleased at having been allowed to stay up late. Two hours later, when Fanny checked on him, she found him sprawled on his bed, still fully dressed, weeping hysterically, "Oh, the music, the music!" he sobbed. "Save me from it, Fanny, save me! It's here...in here!" – he struck his forehead – "and it won't leave me in peace."

Music resonated in his head. Throughout the house, he would drum his fingers on whatever surface was at hand, reflecting the tunes that he "heard." On one occasion when Fanny Dürback complained about

the noise he was making, he drummer instead on a nearby windowpane so animatedly that finally his hand crashed through the glass and was badly cut. Peter's parents hired a piano teacher for him, but soon he was beyond anything she could teach him.

Moscow Disaster

In the meantime, knowing his wife was dissatisfied with life in Votkinsk and yearned for the attractions of city life, Ilya Petrovich resigned his comfortable position and moved the family to Moscow, having heard about a job there that would suit him. However, the move proved to be disastrous. Once they arrived, Ilya Petrovich discovered that a former friend had rushed to Moscow ahead of him and taken the job. The family's entire fortune disappeared and they had to economize.

One of the first things to happen was the dismissal of Fanny. She was spirited out of the house in the middle of the night, with out saying goodbye, so as not to upset Peter. Although Peter corresponded with Fanny for a time, it was 1892 before they were reunited. On one of his swings through western Europe in 1892, he visited her in Montbeillard: "I had dreaded tears and an affecting scene, but...she greeted me as though we had not met for a year – joyfully and tenderly, but quite simply...the past rose up so clearly before me that I seemed to inhale the air of Votkinsk and hear my mother's voice distinctly."

Misery in St. Petersburg

In November 1848, the family moved to St. Petersburg. Ilya Petrovich and his older brother Nikolay were enrolled in the fashionable Schmelling School, which Peter hated. The school was very hard on the boys. Peter left home at 8 each morning, not returning until after 5, and often staying up until after midnight to finish his homework. Viewed as country bumpkins, the brothers were bullied mercilessly by the other students.

In February 1848, both boys developed measles. Nikolay got better, but Peter was very ill for weeks. The doctor determined that he had developed a disease of the spinal chord (possibly meningitis). Peter was ordered to have complete rest for an indefinite period of time. While his recovery took months, at least it ensured that he did not

have to return to the hated Schmelling School. The period of illness took its toll on the sensitive little boy. He now suffered from deep-seated nervous disorders that were to plague him for the rest of his life. He was uncomfortable with people and lacked self-confidence, hiding behind his mother and retreating into his family when faced with any unwelcome situation.

Peter then received a double blow from his parents. They told him he would not be going to the School of Mining Engineers in St. Petersburg, where Nikolay was a student, and they would not educate him to become a musician! At this time in Russia, music was not seen as a respectable vocation. Professional musicians had no standing in polite society, and furthermore there were no music schools to train them. Music was regarded as a suitable hobby for the daughters of good families, so that they could entertain guests. Public concerts in Russia were given almost always by visiting artists from other European countries.

Peter the Student

Instead, Peter, now 10 years old, was sent to a preparatory school for later entry into the School of Jurisprudence in St. Petersburg. His mother stayed with him for a time to help him get settled. As a reward for getting good marks on the school's entrance exams, she took Peter to the city's famous Maryinsky Theatre to see Glinka's opera *A Life for the Tsar*. Glinka is considered to be the "father of Russian Music" and the performance had a powerful effect on young Peter.

Traumatic Events

And then young Peter endured what was to be one of the most traumatic moments of his entire life. The time came for his mother to leave. Peter was allowed to ride with her in her carriage as far as the Central Turnpike, a crossroads for people leaving Moscow. On the way, Peter wept a little, but when the actual moment came, he lost all his self-control. As the carriage door closed upon her, he clung to the handle, refusing to let go. Screaming, he had to be removed by force. As the coach started to move forward, he broke free and ran after it. He grabbed the backboard and was dragged along the muddy, cobbled street until the carriage's increasing speed shook him off, and he was

dumped in the dirt. According to Peter's brother Modest, Peter never got over the horror of that experience. It haunted him for the rest of his life.

Peter spent two years in the preparatory school and was homesick the whole time. It did not help that his family kept promising to visit him son, but never did. However, as a student he did well: he stood third in the school in his final exams, and received high marks for conduct (behaviour).

In 1852, Peter passed his entrance exams for the School of Jurisprudence in St. Petersburg. The purpose of the school was to train young men for senior positions within Russia's civil service.

Peter did well here, and forged some lifelong friendships as well. The building in which the school was housed still exists on what is now Tchaikovsky Boulevard in St. Petersburg.

A Devastating Loss

In 1854, tragedy struck again when Peter's beloved mother died of cholera. Her illness and death came very quickly. Peter was brought in to witness the last rites. Again, it was a traumatic event from which he never really recovered. On the 25th anniversary of his mother's death, he wrote to a friend: "Every moment of that appalling day is as vivid to me as though it was yesterday."

Finding a Place for Music

Music was a part of Peter's schooling. The boys were taken regularly to the theatre and the opera, enabling Peter to become acquainted with the works of Rossini, Bellini, Verdi and Mozart. Peter also sang in the school choir and also took piano lessons from a German pianist who did not think that the boy had any particular talent!

After choir practice, Peter would often entertain his friends at the piano by improvising on whatever tunes they'd been singing. One of his favourite tricks was to play the piano, having covered the keyboard with a towel! He worked on the school's journal, *The School Messenger*, writing a column called "History of Literature in Our Class",

and he kept a private diary he called “Everything”, which he left lying around in his desk at school, rather than locking it away.

Civil Servant and Man-About-Town

And so following his graduation in 1855, Peter became a clerk (first class) in the Ministry of Justice. An amusing story is told of an occasion when Tchaikovsky was sent to deliver an important document signed by his boss. He stopped to chat with a colleague; as they spoke, he absentmindedly tore strips off the document and ate them. What his boss thought of this snack, we don’t know!

Surprisingly, he embarked upon a very active social life. It was a period in his life when music was not important to him. Described as “a dashing young man about town”, he was clean-shaven (beards were fashionable) and smartly dressed in spite of not having money to spend, and a favourite among his friends.

A Return to Music

By 1861, Tchaikovsky turned his attention once more to music, although he was still working at the Ministry of Justice. In 1862, he enrolled in the Russian Musical Society and became a full-time student of music.

Tchaikovsky’s tutor in harmony and counterpoint was Nikolay Zarembo; he recognized Tchaikovsky’s talent and imposed the needed discipline. He studied orchestration with Anton Rubinstein, the director of the school.

Tchaikovsky Finds His Own Voice

Tchaikovsky’s classmate Alexander Rubets tells that it was Rubinstein’s practice to begin a class by reciting some verses, and then requiring his students to come up overnight with some music inspired by them, in various musical forms – e.g. minuet. One day, Rubinstein assigned Tchaikovsky a poem by Zhukovsky called *Midnight Review*, already set to music by Glinka. Rubinstein regarded this as an enormous joke and could not resist running around the school sharing his inspired mischief with other students and teachers. Rubets protested to Rubinstein, who merely shrugged his shoulders and replied, “So what? Glinka

wrote his own music – and Tchaikovsky will write his.” Two days later, Tchaikovsky’s *Midnight Review* turned out to be completely different from Glinka’s. It was a full-scale complex tone poem, with a varied and intricate accompaniment to each verse.

Kamenka and the Davidovs

It was during this period that another significant event occurred which was to resonate throughout Tchaikovsky’s life. His beloved younger sister Alexandra married into the Davidov family. The Davidovs had known the great Russian writer Alexander Pushkin well, and he had been a frequent visitor at Kamenka, the Davidovs’ country estate. It was there that Pushkin had written his poem *The Prisoner of the Caucasus* and enjoyed a romance with the sister of Alexandra’s mother-in-law. Pushkin was Tchaikovsky’s favourite author. Later in his career, Tchaikovsky would set three of Pushkin’s works to music.

Tchaikovsky became very close to the Davidovs and would spend a great deal of his time at Kamenka; it became a retreat for him. The family shared his rise to fame, nurtured and supported him through the crises that were to plague him. He dedicated his last and greatest work, the *Pathétique* symphony, to the Davidovs.

On September 11, 1865, Johann Strauss the younger, the “Waltz King” of Vienna, conducted the first public performance of Tchaikovsky’s *Characteristic Dances* at an open-air concert in Pavlovsk Park. This later became “Dances of the Hay Maidens” in his opera *Voyevoda*.

Graduation with Honours

When Tchaikovsky graduated from the Conservatoire a few months later, he won the silver medal (the first in the school’s history). His name is engraved in marble on the Conservatoire’s staircase.

Professor Tchaikovsky in Moscow

And then he left St. Petersburg to become Professor of Musical Theory at the Moscow Conservatoire, with Nikolay Rubinstein, the brother of Anton Rubinstein, as director. Nikolay was energetic and talented, and something of a bon vivant in Moscow. He knew everybody worth knowing. Tchaikovsky accepted an invitation to live in Nikolay

Rubinstein's house, a mixed blessing. While this arrangement saved Tchaikovsky a lot of money (in fact, Rubinstein fed him and even bought him clothes), the house was constantly full of his host's friends and acquaintances, not all of whom Tchaikovsky liked. Rubinstein took Tchaikovsky to all the social events in Moscow, where, to his dismay, the musician soon found himself regarded as one of the city's most eligible bachelors. Painfully shy with women, he preferred to avoid them socially. Unable to sleep, Tchaikovsky often stayed up drinking coffee and liquor, smoking cigarettes and playing cards. These habits were to last throughout his life.

Off With His Head!

Shortly after, Tchaikovsky himself conducted his *Overture in F*. This was a painful experience for Tchaikovsky. He disliked conducting, and was terribly afraid that his head would fall off! A member of the audience for that concert described how throughout the piece, Tchaikovsky kept a tight grip on his chin with one hand, while waving the baton with the other. It took him years to get over this unusual fear.

A Close Call!

Immersed in music, Tchaikovsky took little notice of politics. On April 16, 1866, following a failed assassination attempt on the Tsar Alexander 111, Tchaikovsky was at the Bolshoi for a performance of Glinka's *A Life for the Tsar*. The audience was in a very nationalistic mood, but Tchaikovsky was completely unaware of this. He was far more interested in the music than in the patriotic fervour it inspired. The audience soon took notice of this quiet unresponsive man and demanded that he leave the theatre immediately! Thinking himself to be in some danger he departed...quickly!

Sensitive to the Critics

Tchaikovsky endured a stormy relationship with the critics throughout his career. He was very proud of his work and at the same time terribly insecure, and tended to harbour grudges against his critics. He reacted badly even to those who merely wanted to engage in a constructive exchange of ideas. It is said, however, that he could be extremely respectful to those whom he felt might be useful to him. On

more than one occasion, he completely destroyed compositions that had been criticized. "I must confess that I have but one interest in life; my success as a composer," said Tchaikovsky.

First Love and Heartbreak

In September 1868, Tchaikovsky fell in love with an opera singer. Desirée Artot was performing in Rossini's *Otello* at the Bolshoi, and Tchaikovsky was present for opening night. Although she was not particularly beautiful, she was charming, and Tchaikovsky was soon obsessed with her. He composed a piano piece, *Romance in F*, which he dedicated to her. Soon there were rumours of an imminent engagement, and then, with no word of warning, Artot married a Spanish baritone. Tchaikovsky was devastated, but only for a short time. Some 21 years later, while on tour of Western Europe, he stopped in Berlin where he visited Desirée Artot.

Romeo and Juliet

The premiere of *Romeo and Juliet* in 1870, was something of a fiasco, through no fault of Tchaikovsky's. Nikolay Rubenstein was the conductor on that occasion. The day before the premiere, he had been involved in a well-publicized court case with the result that the audience was far more interested in him, than in the music! Many years would pass before *Romeo and Juliet* would achieve the popularity it deserved.

Soldiering On

In 1871, needing more peace and quiet, Tchaikovsky finally moved out of Nikolay Rubinstein's house into a three-room flat, where he could compose undisturbed. He supplemented his income by writing reviews as music critic for the newspaper the Moscow Viedemost for a few years.

In April of 1874, Tchaikovsky's opera *The Oprichnik* premiered. The road to opening night had been a stormy one, with Tchaikovsky forced to agree to numerous cuts and revisions. He advised all his friends not to bother coming to the premiere! They ignored his advice. Led by Nikolay Rubinstein, the entire staff of the Moscow Conservatoire arrived at the Maryinsky Theatre that night, where they were able to

witness a very successful production, one for which Tchaikovsky was given a prize.

A Chore

He accepted a commission from the musical magazine Nuvelist in 1875, to compose a series of twelve piano pieces, to be published at the rate of one per month. Tchaikovsky came to regard this as a chore; he had his servant remind him the day before each deadline so that he could toss off a new piece in time to go to press. The complete collection has been published as *The Seasons*.

Tchaikovsky's ego received a boost when he received a visit from the great novelist Leo Tolstoy, whom he admired greatly. In Tolstoy's honour, Nikolay Rubinstein organized a musical evening at the Conservatoire; the program included the "andante cantabile" from Tchaikovsky's first *String Quartet*. After the concert, Tchaikovsky wrote in his diary, "Never in the whole course of my life did I feel so flattered, never so proud of my creative power, as when Leo Tolstoy, sitting by my side, listened to my "andante" while the tears streamed down his face."

A Strange Friendship

In December of 1876, Madame Nadezhda von Meck entered his life. She was a wealthy widow, with some peculiar habits, who loved music and admired Tchaikovsky's work. In many regards she came to be his best friend. Hearing of Tchaikovsky's financial difficulties through a mutual acquaintance, she commissioned some compositions from him. Not one to let a good thing pass him by, Tchaikovsky dedicated his *Fourth Symphony in F minor* to Mme von Meck; she responded immediately by lending him money. The two entered into a lengthy correspondence that lasted for years, but met face-to-face only on a very few occasions, usually by accident.

In 1878, he spent some time in Florence, living in a villa rented for him by Mme von Meck. She herself was in Florence at that time, and left him a schedule of her daily walks so that they would not meet. In fact, they did meet accidentally a few times, but never spoke. Instead, they exchanged notes by messenger, commenting on the other's actions and appearance. On a later occasion, in the summer of

1879, Tchaikovsky accepted an invitation from her to visit Braille, her summer estate. There, he stayed in a small cottage on the grounds, as she herself was staying in the main house. Once again she gave him her schedule; he did indeed meet her in the woods one day. At that point, the tone of her letters changed. She seemed to suggest that she was in love with him. Tactfully, he responded that the love he felt for her could be “expressed in no way other than music.”

It is estimated that they exchanged 1,100 letters over a period of 13 years! She also provided Tchaikovsky with sufficient money over that period of time to enable him to devote his time to composing. She even established an annual allowance for him. This strange friendship came to a strange end in 1890 when he received a letter from Mme von Meck telling him that she was on the verge of bankruptcy and that his allowance would have to stop. The letter also suggested that this would be the end of their friendship as well. Tchaikovsky replied with concern for what had happened to her and hurt that she would want to end their friendship. She did not answer his letter. Shortly afterwards, he learned that her financial problems had been resolved and she was nowhere near being bankrupt. He was embarrassed and, try as he might, he could never quite banish the thought that she just wanted to be rid of him. The only plausible explanation he received was that she suffered from a serious nervous disorder. He never heard from her again. A bizarre end to a bizarre friendship!

The Seagull

Tchaikovsky now entered a new phase of his life, one in which he seemed to be quite unsettled, travelling back and forth between Russia and other parts of Europe. Ironically, he suffered terribly from homesickness when abroad, yet this wandering existence seemed to suit his name. Tchaikovsky in Russian means “like a seagull.” His reputation was spreading across Europe and, as he continued to compose, word came back time and again of successful performances of his works, although he continued to receive mixed reviews from the Russian critics.

Death of a Friend

In 1882, Nikolay Rubinstein died in Paris. Tchaikovsky hurried to the funeral and stayed to see the coffin placed aboard a train bound for

Russia. He composed a piano trio, *Trio in A minor* (Op. 50) which he dedicated to Rubinstein's memory. It is considered a masterpiece among his chamber works.

Another Devastating Loss

In 1891, Tchaikovsky would travel to North America, but decided to first spend some time in Rouen, France. The plan was for Modest to meet him there and see him off at the port of Le Havre. However, Modest received news that their beloved sister Alexandra Davidov, who had not been well for some time, had died. Knowing that the news would devastate Tchaikovsky, he left immediately for Rouen to tell him personally. He found his brother very depressed and lonely, but so happy to see him that he decided to let Tchaikovsky sail to the United States not knowing of Alexandra's death. The plan backfired. Homesick, Tchaikovsky returned to Paris. He picked up a Russian newspaper there, and in it found the notice of Alexandra's death. He was devastated.

A Visit to North America

Burdened with sadness Tchaikovsky left for the United States. The voyage was not made any better for him by bouts of violent seasickness and the suicide of a fellow passenger at sea. He spent his first night in New York, weeping in his hotel room, although he did venture out for a walk along Broadway. His North American tour was a huge success, however! Among other things, he gave four concerts as part of the opening of the New York City Music Hall (now Carnegie Hall), and visited Washington where the Russian Embassy arranged a musical evening in tribute to him. He even slipped across the border to Niagara Falls, Canada.

A Beloved Conductor

In May 1892, *The Nutcracker* was complete. Tchaikovsky left for Moscow in May to fulfill three conducting engagements there. He was so popular with the opera company that on his departure from the train station, the entire orchestra and all the singers turned out to say good-bye to him.

Klin: Tchaikovsky's Last Home

In the meantime, he had purchased a new country home at Klin. It had a small garden and exceptionally large rooms, which Tchaikovsky loved. It was to be his last home. After his death, it was purchased by his longtime servant Alexey Sofronov, who passed it on to Tchaikovsky's brother Modest, and his nephew Bob Davidov, in 1897. It later became the Tchaikovsky Museum. After World War II, the State took possession of the house and restored it completely, after it had been ransacked by the German invaders in 1941.

Musical Pancakes

An amusing story is told about a commission he received from his publisher Jurgenseon in 1893, for as many songs and piano pieces as "he cared to write". He wrote to his nephew Bob Davidov, "I am engaged in making musical pancakes, and today I flipped the tenth." These in time came to include the *Eighteen Piano Pieces Op. 72*, a set of six songs (said to be among the finest he composed), a Military March written for his cousin Andrew Tchaikovsky who was colonel of an infantry regiment, and a transcription of *Mozart's Piano Fantasy No. 4*, for voices and piano.

Cambridge Honours

In June of 1893, he was accorded a singular honor. He, along with fellow composers Camille Saint-Saëns, Arrigo Boito and Max Bruch, was to receive an honorary degree from Cambridge University in England. Edvard Grieg was also to have been honoured but was too ill to attend. On June 12, the four composers "dressed in college caps of black velvet with gold tassels, and silk robes of scarlet and white" received their honorary degrees. Cambridge, "with its peculiar customs which retain much that is medieval, with its colleges that resemble monasteries, and its buildings recalling a remote past" made "a very agreeable impression" on Tchaikovsky.

The Final Chapter

In October 1893, Tchaikovsky traveled to St. Petersburg to direct rehearsals for the first performance of his *Symphony No. 6*, the *Pathétique*. As the train passed through the village of Frolovskoye,

where he had lived for a time, he pointed out the churchyard to his fellow passengers. "I shall be buried there, and people will point out my grave as they go by," he told them.

It was prophetic. One month later, in spite of knowing that there was an epidemic of cholera in the city, the same disease that had taken his mother's life, Tchaikovsky drank a glass of water that had not been boiled. He was soon very ill. In spite of heroic efforts by three doctors, he died on November 6, 1893, in the presence of his brothers Modest and Nikolay, his servant Alexey Sofronov, and the doctors. His funeral was the largest St. Petersburg had ever seen.

The Wife From Hell

In May 1877, there occurred an event that was to lead to one of the great disasters of Tchaikovsky's life. He received a love letter from Antonia Milyukova, one of his pupils at the Conservatoire. She was 28 years old, unmarried, lived alone, and was not particularly pretty. She was also rather dull-witted, and believed that every man who saw her was in love with her! When Tchaikovsky responded to her letter, saying that he did not feel the same way about her, she threatened to commit suicide.

This was exactly the right note to touch Tchaikovsky's strong sense of the dramatic! Believing that Antonia really would end her life, he proposed marriage; she accepted his proposal at once. They were married in July, 1877, with only two witnesses present. They left the same evening for a honeymoon in St. Petersburg. The whole episode quickly became a nightmare for Tchaikovsky. On their return from the honeymoon, he was on the brink of a mental and physical collapse. He described his wife as "physically repulsive." Tchaikovsky fled to Kamenka alone in order to think things over. He spent the summer there, recovering from his ordeal and reflecting.

All too soon, it was September and time to return to Moscow. He was met at the train station by Antonia and by the next morning, he was again in a state of desperation. The apartment felt like a prison to him. He resumed teaching at the Conservatoire, but his nerves were completely shot. One day in early October he waded fully dressed, into the freezing Moskva River, until the waters came to his waist. He hoped to catch pneumonia and die. He fled to St. Petersburg, where

he was met at the station, barely recognizable, by his brother Anatol. As soon as he reached his hotel, Tchaikovsky suffered a complete nervous breakdown and remained unconscious for two days!

Anatol and Nikolay Rubenstein paid Antonia a visit, and advised her to seek a divorce from Tchaikovsky for the sake of his health. They were surprised that she agreed immediately, not realizing that she was none too stable, and that her apparent calm hid the storm that raged within her. She spent some time with Tchaikovsky's sister, Alexandra, and while Tchaikovsky's condition improved, Antonia's got worse. She suffered from fits of weeping, and bit her fingernails so badly that she scattered bloodstains throughout the house. Eventually, Antonia began tormenting Tchaikovsky and his family. She wrote threatening letters and refused to grant him a divorce. At that time, the only ground for divorce was adultery, and Antonia claimed that Tchaikovsky was innocent of such a charge, and that furthermore he was still in love with her. Fearing a scandal, Tchaikovsky did not sue her for divorce. Finally, Tchaikovsky's publisher, Jurgenson, gave Antonia money in return for her leaving Moscow.

This, however, was not a permanent solution. Tchaikovsky returned home to St. Petersburg from one of his trips abroad to the apartment he now shared with his brother Anatol, to find Antonia lying in wait for him. She subjected him to an abusive tirade for two hours, and calmed down only when she was offered money. Instead of returning to Moscow, she used the money to rent a flat in the same building. As soon as she moved in, she resumed her abusive siege of the composer. He fled to his refuge, Kamenka.

Eventually, in 1896, Antonia was certified insane, and was placed in an institution where she died in 1917, during the Russian Revolution.

The Times of Tchaikovsky

Tsar Alexander II

If you were to look at a map of the world what country do you think is the biggest in the world? If you guessed Russia, then you are correct! Russia has an extremely interesting history. Although technically a part of Europe, Russia, by virtue of its location, has always been isolated from the rest of the continent and never did develop in quite the same way.

Because of its size and vast natural resources, Russia has also posed an irresistible challenge to those conquerors who want to capture all of Europe for their own. In the nineteenth century, Napoleon led his army into Russia, only to be defeated not by superior forces, but by the climate. The Russians had only to wait for their harsh winter to set in, for the French invaders to be driven back.

A similar fate awaited Hitler when his troops attempted to capture Russia. They too were overcome and ultimately defeated by the Russian winter.

Of Tsars, Tsarinas and Tsarevitches

Up until the Russian Revolution in the early part of the twentieth century, Russia was ruled by the Romanov family. The ruler was called a Tsar, the wife of the Tsar was called the Tsarina, and the son who would succeed his father as Tsar was called the Tsarevitch. The Romanovs ruled from St. Petersburg, the capital of Russia, and the centre of Russian culture. There was a large Russian nobility, but there was not much of a middle class. The nobility were attended to by serfs, or peasants, who were little more than slaves. The Russian serfs were numerous, and very, very poor. Things improved slightly for the peasants when the Emancipation of the Serfs was passed in 1861 (about the same time that slavery was abolished in the United States).

The Winds of Change Blow Over Russia

By the first half of the nineteenth century, when Tchaikovsky was born, the winds of change blowing across the rest of Europe had begun

to have an impact in Russia. The social structure, with its clearly defined groups of haves and have-nots, was decaying from within, and the population was becoming increasingly restless. This restlessness spanned nearly 100 years. In 1825, a group called the Decembrist rebels were executed for causing trouble, and nearly 92 years later, in 1917, a revolution overturned Russian society once and for all. The Tsar, the Tsarina and their five children were shot at point-blank range, and only recently were their remains given a proper burial.

Unrest and Uprisings

In between there were a number of skirmishes. In 1866, an assassination attempt on Tsar Alexander II failed, but the unrest continued to grow. A few years later, war broke out between Serbia and Turkey. Tsar Alexander II and his government supported Serbia. This was because in a previous war (the Crimean War) with Turkey, Russia had hoped to gain a seaport on the Mediterranean by capturing some Turkish territory, but lost. By supporting Serbia, they hoped still to get that seaport. It was a bad mistake – Serbia was defeated and this forced Russia to declare war on Turkey in 1877. Unrest increased with the coming of war, and in 1878, the country endured a wave of terrorism, aimed at inciting the peasants to revolt by assassinating high government officials and thus paralyzing the government. Tsar Alexander II attempted to stem the unrest by enacting a number of measures intended to modernize and liberalize Russia. He reformed the legal system and the universities and reduced censorship.

More Bad News....

In 1881, Tsar Alexander II was assassinated in a terrorist bombing. He was succeeded by his son the Tsarevitch, Alexander III, who became the new Tsar. The Romanovs continued to isolate themselves from European ideas and from Russia's own growing artistic and intellectual community, and so they became increasingly out of touch with the Russian population. This is especially true of Nicholas II, the son of Alexander III, born in 1868, who was destined to be the last Tsar of Russia.

A Musical Interlude

Tchaikovsky's ideas and music were most certainly influenced by the events that bracketed his life, although he didn't show much interest in politics. Russia was always suspicious of Europe, and the threat posed to its existing social order forced Russia to scrutinize all influences from Western Europe with "aggressive suspicion." This attitude to the rest of Europe was reflected in the work produced by all Russia's composers and writers.

Interestingly enough, Tchaikovsky in many ways was a throwback: his views of his country, his loyalty to his Tsar, were all deeply rooted in a past that was decaying. Yet, musically, his main achievement was in becoming Russia's first full-time professional composer, and in being the only one who was not afraid to allow western influence on his work, as well as sharing his own work with European and North American audiences. His music combined a profound Russian sensibility with a feeling for Western culture that was unique among his contemporaries.

The Music of Tchaikovsky

At the time of Tchaikovsky's birth in 1840, there was no real tradition of Russian music, other than the folk songs of the peasants and the choral singing that was a central part of Russian church services. Music was viewed as an accomplishment for young ladies from good families. It was not regarded as a suitable profession, and there were no training facilities to produce musicians in the Russia into which Tchaikovsky was born. At the time that the St. Petersburg Conservatoire opened under Anton Rubinstein, Rubinstein was registered as a merchant, which had been his father's occupation, not a musician. Glinka was listed as a landowner, a nobleman in the government of Smolensk; Borodin was a professor of chemistry; Balakirev a mathematical; Riminsky-Korsakov a naval officer; Mussorgsky a civil servant.

Yet a scant 73 years later, in 1913, Igor Stravinsky's *The Rite of Spring* placed Russia firmly in the forefront of music in the twentieth century. It was Peter Illych Tchaikovsky who bridged the two musical eras. Paradoxically, Tchaikovsky's music, for all its incorporation of Western European tradition, remained essentially Russian. To Stravinsky, Tchaikovsky was "the most Russian of us all."

Tchaikovsky was a prolific composer, and a master of many different forms. He composed operas, ballets, orchestral music, fantasy overtures, chamber music, piano music, and vocal music.

Tchaikovsky loved to read, and many of his works are classic pieces of literature, interpreted as ballet or opera. Often his brother Modest would be the one to suggest suitable material for the composer to work with. Painfully shy with women, he nonetheless found them to be excellent subject matter. He seemed drawn to the plight of deprived, suffering, or otherwise doomed women, and this was reflected in a number of his compositions, for example: *Romeo and Juliet*, *Francesca da Rimini*, *Swan Lake*, *The Maid of Orleans* (he'd been fascinated with the story of Joan of Arc all his life), and *The Queen of Spades*. Tchaikovsky also adapted *Hamlet* and *The Tempest* (Shakespeare), folk tales, three works by Pushkin, poetry by Lord Byron, and excerpts from Dante.

The Fourth Symphony

Following his disastrous marriage to Antonia Milyukova, Tchaikovsky was able to complete two of his best works, the opera *Eugene Onegin* and his *Fourth Symphony*, in 1878. In a letter to his benefactress, Mme von Meck, he told her that the theme of the latter is Fate. The theme recurs throughout the music, uniting the structure. The first movement is quite lyrical, similar to an intermezzo, while the third focuses on pizzicato strings. The finale is impassioned and melodramatic and incorporates a folk theme. The incorporation of folk themes is, of course, one of the things for which Tchaikovsky is famous.

Piano Concerto No. 1

Tchaikovsky was not a virtuoso pianist, and so he went to Nikolay Rubinstein, the head of the Moscow Conservatory where he was working in 1873, to ask for his advice on writing music for his first piano concerto. When Rubinstein first heard the piano concerto he disliked it immensely, saying that the writing was uneven and extremely difficult to play. Tchaikovsky was furious by this response, and decided not to dedicate the concerto to Rubinstein but rather to a German virtuoso pianist and conductor, Hans von Bülow, who performed it for this first time in Boston in 1875. From its first performance, this work has been extremely popular, and is perhaps the best known and best loved of all of Tchaikovsky's major works.

Swan Lake

When *Swan Lake* had its premiere in 1877, it did not get off to a good start. The dancers complained that some of the score was undanceable, and the production overall was of poor quality. Interest in the ballet was not revived until after Tchaikovsky's death. In fact Tchaikovsky never did see a satisfactory production of *Swan Lake*. The story line of *Swan Lake* seems to derive from German and Russian folk tales, and as is the case in *Romeo and Juliet*, ends with the deaths of the lovers, Siegfried and Odette. The music is hauntingly beautiful.

Romeo and Juliet

It was Balakirev, Tchaikovsky's contemporary and friend, who suggested that Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* should be set to music. This Tchaikovsky did in 1869; it was revised twice. It was a perfect subject for him. In turning the tragedy into an abstract musical drama, the fate of the lovers is Tchaikovsky's main concern, and he makes sure that the listener understands that the ending of the story is a spiritual triumph for them. The music is programmatic, that is it develops and expresses a theme. He worked in blocks of material; each musical theme was intended to represent a character in the drama. Because the story of the star-crossed young lovers revolves around a feud between their families, Tchaikovsky has the music move back and forth between the sections of the orchestra to suggest conflict and strife. The role of the well-meaning Friar Lawrence is presented as a religious chant, and a funeral march, utilizing B minor chords, rounds out the action at the end.

Nutcracker Suite

The *Nutcracker Suite* has become associated with the Christmas season and the children's toys. It is an adaptation of Hoffman's tale *The Nutcracker and the King of Mice*. Tchaikovsky was not excited about the project when he first began, but became increasingly more so as time went on. While in Paris in 1891, he discovered a new musical instrument, the 'celeste' invented by Vicor Mustel. He described it as "something between a piano and a glockenspiel with a heavenly tone," and wanted to incorporate it into his new ballet. Listen for this sound in *Dance of the Sugarplum Fairy*. When the *Nutcracker* premiered in 1892, the audience was so enthusiastic that five of its six movements had to be repeated.

Variations on a Rococo Theme for Cello and Orchestra

Tchaikovsky wrote this piece in 1876 as a tribute to his "musical god" Mozart. Listen for the cello!

1812 Overture

The *1812 Overture* is one of Tchaikovsky's most popular works. Tchaikovsky wrote it in 1880 as part of the celebrations commemorating the Tsar's Silver Junilee and Russia's defeat of Napoleon. He was not particularly fond of it at the time. He regarded

it as “very noisy” and felt that because he had written it “without the pealing of church bells and the boom of cannons, effects intended to suggest a great celebration. There is also a bar or two of *The Marseillaise*, the national anthem of France, to help make the point. The *1812 Overture* is often performed as the finale in a concert.

Tchaikovsky lived at a time of intense musical activity all across Europe. During his career, he made the acquaintance of a great many composers. In his diary, he wrote about other composers, some living, some dead. He praised Beethoven “unconditionally” although he “could not love him.” He enjoyed Bach only because “it is interesting to play a good fugue”, not because he considered him a great genius. He thought Handel only a “fourth-rate composer.....not even interesting.” He rather liked Gluck in spite of his “poor creative gift”, and found “some works” of Haydn enjoyable.

Tchaikovsky couldn't seem to make up his mind about Brahms. He wrote with disdain about his music, considering him to be a “self-conscious mediocrity”, and was irritated that Brahms “should be recognized as a genius.....so chaotic, so dry and so meaningless.” After hearing Brahms' *First Symphony*, he commented that “I find him (Brahms) cold and obscure – full of pretensions but without any real depth.” Nonetheless, in 1887, Tchaikovsky was in Leipzig, Germany, as the guest of Adolf Brodsky. Brodsky had other guests as well, composers whose company he enjoyed. Among them were Johannes Brahms, whom Tchaikovsky described on that occasion as “a handsome man, rather stout...his fine head, almost that of an old man, recall the type of a handsome, benign, elderly Russian priest.”

At Brodsky's, he made the acquaintance of Edvard Grieg – Tchaikovsky found that his personality matched his “warmly emotional music” which he had long admired. England's Dame Ethel Smyth was also a guest of Brodsky's. Tchaikovsky described her as “not handsome, but having what people call an expressive or an intelligent face.”

In 1877, Tchaikovsky attended a concert of Wagner's *Die Walküre*, which he did not like. He liked the French composers. Tchaikovsky's brother Modest describes a rather bizarre event in 1875 when the French composer Camille Saint-Saëns visited Moscow. Tchaikovsky found Saint-Saëns to be witty and fascinating, and furthermore discovered that they both had the same secret ambition:

to be ballet dancers! Between them, they created a little ballet, *Pygmalion and Galatea*, which they performed on the stage of the Conservatoire. It must have been quite a sight! Saint- Saëns, aged 40, played the part of Galatea, while Tchaikovsky, 32, appeared as Pygmalion. Nikolay Rubinstein took the part of the orchestra. Unfortunately, there were no spectators!

Tchaikovsky too was honoured and commented upon by his contemporaries. The German pianist Hans von Bülow performed Tchaikovsky's *First Piano Concerto* to great acclaim at the Wiesbaden festival in 1879. Also on the program was his *Rococo Variations*. Seated in the audience was Franz Liszt who declared: "At last, here is music again."

In 1888, he gave a concert in Prague, Bohemia (now the Czech Republic). The great Czech composer Dvorák presented him with a score of his *Second Symphony*, which he inscribed: "To Peter Tchaikovsky, in memory of Prague: Antonin Dvorák, February 18, 1888."

On one of his many western European tours, Tchaikovsky conducted a performance of *Eugene Onegin* in Hamburg, Germany. It was a frustrating experience for him. The singers and orchestra were well prepared, but in translating the score from Russian to German, some minor changes had been necessary that he had not been expecting. Exasperated, Tchaikovsky handed over the baton to the local conductor, observing later, "The conductor here is not merely passable, but actually has genius." The conductor was Gustav Mahler.

In May, 1893, a few short months before his death, Tchaikovsky was privileged to catch a glimpse of the future of Russian music. He went to the Bolshoi for the opening night of an opera called *Aleko*. It was written by a 19-year-old student who many claim became Tchaikovsky's natural successor: Sergei Rachmaninoff.

Finale

Fittingly, the last word should belong to Tchaikovsky himself:

I have reached a very mature age without resting upon anything positive, without having calmed my restless spirit by either

religion or philosophy. Undoubtedly I should have gone mad but for music. Music is indeed the most beautiful of all Heaven's gifts to humanity wandering in the darkness. Alone it calms, enlightens our souls. It is not the straw to which the drowning man clings; but a true friend, refuge and comforter, for whose sake life is worth living. Perhaps there will be no music in Heaven. Well, let us give our mortal life to it as long as it lasts.