

Peter Ilyitch Tschaikowsky

An Appreciation By Samuel Chotzinoff



1840-1893

MODESTE TSCHAIKOWSKY prefaces his biography of his famous brother with this excerpt from a letter:

"To regret the past, to hope in the future, and never to be satisfied with the present—this is my life."

A more fitting epitomization of Peter Ilyitch Tschaikowsky could hardly be imagined. Volatile Russian to the core, Tschaikowsky was by turns in moods of dizzy rapture and utmost dejection. Looking back, his mistakes always seemed to him irretrievable; and a situation demanding any sort of firm stand always left him terrified. Yet, with all his self-dramatization, he possessed one redeeming trait: His sense of humor extended to himself, and when a crisis was safely past, he could ridicule his own despair with perfect good-humor.

There was a quality of loveliness almost childlike about Tschaikowsky. Children, in fact, adored him, and he returned their affection. Their elders, however, threw him into a continual state of panic which he finally ended, with the Heaven-sent assistance of a woman as misanthropic as himself, by withdrawing from society altogether.

Peter Ilyitch Tschaikowsky was born May 10, 1840, in the Russian town of Kamsko-Votinsk, the second son of an aristocratic family which boasted noble descent. He was intended for a lawyer, and was set to study at the school of Jurisprudence in St. Petersburg. He was not a very good student; even his devoted brother Modeste says that the seven years of schooling produced

only "an amiable, but mediocre, official."

Meantime he studied piano as an amateur. His teacher recognized his great aptitude for music, but did not realize that he had a future genius under his care. When the elder Tschaikowsky asked his opinion of a musical career for Peter Ilyitch, the teacher discouraged such notions. Nevertheless the father, knowing and caring nothing for music, perceiving the wretched standing of a professional musician in Russia, but sensing that it was in this direction that his son's true interest lay, encouraged him to make music his life work.

Tschaikowsky received a Government post at the end of his apprentice years, and meantime studied at the St. Petersburg Conservatory in the evenings. At the age of twenty-six, he joined the faculty of the Moscow Conservatory as a teacher of theory.

Ten years of arduous labor followed. Tschaikowsky was teaching five hours a day, unhappy in the belief that he was a failure as a teacher (he was wrong in this; actually he became the most valuable man in the Conservatory and his pupils adored him) but in spite of these difficulties he managed to compose a great deal of music and establish the beginnings of a reputation. One of Tschaikowsky's chief virtues was his ability to work hard. He often boasted in his letters that with him it was never a question of waiting until he found himself in the proper mood. He could compose anywhere, at any time, and in the most trying surroundings. He welcomed commissions, and turned them out according to schedule.

There were few situations with which Tschaikowsky could cope effectively; but he had little difficulty in disciplining his creative powers.

In the winter of 1876, Tschaikowsky received his first commission from Nadejda von Meck. Then began one of the strangest relationships that ever existed between a musician and a patron.

Nadejda von Meck was a widow, several years Tschaikowsky's senior, and extremely wealthy. She was a sincere music-lover, and retiring as Tschaikowsky himself. She never ventured out of her great Moscow house except when, well fortified by servants, she went away on a trip; and her doors were closed to all save a favored few visitors. One of these was Nicholas Rubinstein, brother of the great Anton and director of the Moscow Conservatory, who presumably first interested her in his gifted theory teacher.

When she heard Tschaikowsky's music for the first time, Madame von Meck, true daughter of a race peculiarly sensitive to the stimulus of music (even Count Tolstoi, Philistine though Tschaikowsky believed him to be, shed tears over that composer's famous *Andante Cantabile*) was enraptured. She commissioned several works during the years 1876-77. Meantime a steady correspondence sprang up between them.

It was clearly understood from the beginning that neither should attempt to invade the other's privacy. Thus secure, these two timid people sat down at their writing-desks and poured out their souls to each other. Peter Ilyitch told of his dislike of Conservatory routine, of the joys and sorrows of composition, of his daily vexations, of his state of health. For her part, Madame von Meck described her domestic affairs, her children, and, most of all, the pleasures she derived from hearing his music.

In May, 1877, Tschaikowsky took a daring step. He asked Madame von Meck for a sum equal to his entire yearly salary from the Conservatory. She granted his request, at the same time refusing his offer of repaying her out of the royalties from his compositions. His music, she

said, was more than adequate recompense. And then, as she herself later admitted, she promptly repented her generosity.

On July 15, 1877, Tschaikowsky wrote to Nadejda that he was engaged to be married. The girl was Antonina Miliukoff, who had fallen in love with Tschaikowsky from a distance, and wrote him ardent letters begging him to call on her. Tschaikowsky did not return her affection in the slightest; but, suffering from his constitutional dislike of hurting anyone's feelings, he replied to her letters, and went to see her. In a vague way, Tschaikowsky felt that he had somehow committed himself by allowing matters to proceed to the stage where she was turning down offers from other and wealthier suitors; moreover there was pressure from his aging father, who did not approve of a thirty-seven-year-old son, established in his profession, who was still a bachelor. All his friends approved the step, and on July 18, 1877, Peter Ilyitch and Antonina were married.

It would be hard to produce evidence that Madame von Meck was interested in Tschaikowsky save from the standpoint of his music; nevertheless, as she confessed in a letter two years later, she had come to feel a proprietary interest in him, and the news was a shock to her. Nevertheless, she wrote a warm letter of congratulation, and wished him success in his marital venture.

Her wishes, however, were vain. On July 27 Tschaikowsky wrote Nadejda that he needed to go away for a few days. She sent money for the journey by return mail, and Tschaikowsky fled to Kiev.

There he sat down and wrote a long, almost hysterical letter explaining that his marriage had been a mistake, that he did not love his wife, and never wanted to see her again. After a six weeks' visit with his sister, the composer returned to Moscow and Antonina. But again, after two weeks in Moscow, Tschaikowsky found his married life unendurable. He went to St. Petersburg, where he was met by his brother Anatol, and suf-

ferred a cruel nervous attack that kept him unconscious forty-eight hours. Clearly, to live with Antonina any longer was out of the question for Peter Ilyitch. The brothers went to Switzerland.

There Peter Ilyitch wrote to Madame von Meck of all that had happened. He received in reply, not merely a casual sum of money, but the first installment of an annuity that was to free him from his exhausting labors at the Conservatory, make him independent of Antonina, and enable him to devote all his time to composition.

After half a year of traveling, during which time the Fourth Symphony was completed and sent to Moscow, Tschaikowsky returned home to face the inevitable gossip and annoyance attendant on a divorce suit. He saw now that life with Antonina was out of the question, and the cumbersome legal machinery necessary for the divorce was set in motion. In the midst of much legal wrangling, Antonina disappeared and could not be found. She returned periodically to demand money from Tschaikowsky, but he never succeeded in making further headway with the divorce. When Antonina died in a madhouse years later, she was still Mme. Tschaikowsky.

The great crisis in his life past, Tschaikowsky felt the need of restoring his shattered nerves. As always, he had composed furiously, even in the midst of his greatest emotional stress. Now, however, he was in need of a change of scene. He followed Nadejda to Florence, where he lived in a little house near the von Meck villa, and here, out walking one afternoon, he stepped aside for an approaching carriage—and saw his benefactress for the first time. Both were thrilled. Later they saw each other at the theatre. But it went no further. Tschaikowsky never spoke to Nadejda von Meck, and never heard her voice.

The passing years found Tschaikowsky hard at work on his composing. He travelled from place to place. Summers he often spent at a little cottage prepared for him on the von Meck summer estate. His fame was steadily increasing; his music was accepted even in the concert halls of

Paris and Berlin, which had formerly put up their eyebrows at Russian music and musicians. He was nationally famous; all Russia felt that he, like the Rubinstains, was a champion of Russian music, and honored him as a national hero. He toured a great deal also, conducting his own works in the principal European capitals.

Then, in the autumn of 1890, came a cruel shock.

Nadejda wrote him a letter saying that, due to severe financial reverses, she would be unable to continue his pension. This was nothing to Tschaikowsky, who cared nothing for money, regarding as luxury what to another person would have been minimum essentials; besides, his music was bringing him an ever-increasing income. But two things disturbed him: The restrained, almost curt tone of Nadejda's letter, and the fact that, during a visit to Moscow, he had discovered that the von Meck fortune was intact.

Still hurt and puzzled by the behavior of Madame von Meck, Tschaikowsky came to New York, where he conducted four concerts, and was lionized, asked out to dinner, and slapped on the back by a millionaire named Carnegie. He wrote brother Modeste that if he had not been so homesick and disturbed he would have fallen quite in love with these people.

Tschaikowsky hurried back to Russia, but there was no letter from Nadejda von Meck—only a brief note from her son-in-law stating that she was ill and could not be shown Tschaikowsky's letters. The idyll was terminated, why, no one knows.

Little time remained for the composer. In August, 1893, he completed the orchestration of the B minor Symphony, and conducted at the first performance. On November 2, Tschaikowsky was feeling out of sorts. He refused wine or coffee, and drank instead a glass of water which had not been boiled. It was the cholera season, and such an act was sheer foolhardiness. Peter Ilyitch was down with cholera that night. He died four days later, November 6, 1893.

The Symphony

TSCHAIKOWSKY could not conceive of music without a program. For his Fourth Symphony, he adapted the basic idea of Beethoven's Fifth Symphony, changed, of course, to suit his own personality and temperament. The theme throughout is Fate, characterized by the quick repeated notes in the brass which open the symphony.

Writing to Madame von Meck in 1878, Tschai-kowsky said in part:

"The introduction is the germ of the entire symphony, the idea upon which all else depends.

"This is 'Fatum,' the inexorable force that prevents our hopes of happiness from being realized, that watches jealously lest our felicity should become full and unclouded. It is unconquerable, inescapable. Nothing remains but to submit to what seems useless unhappiness.

"Despair and discontent grow stronger, sharper. Would it not be wiser to turn from reality and sink into dreams?

"Oh, joy, at last the sweet and tender dream appears. Some bright, clear human image passes, beckoning me on.

"How delicious, and how remote now, the distressing first theme of the Allegro. Little by little, a dream possesses the soul. Happiness is here! But no, this was only a dream, and 'Fatum' awakes us.

"The second movement expresses another phase of

suffering. It is the melancholy that comes in the evenings when we sit alone, and, weary of work, we try to read, but the book falls from our hand. Memories crowd upon us. One regrets the past, but one would not begin life anew, one is too weary.

"The third movement expresses no definite feelings, rather it is a succession of capricious arabesques, those intangible images that pass through the mind when one has drunk wine and feels the first touch of intoxication. The soul is neither gay nor sad. Suddenly comes to mind the picture of a drunken peasant, a brief street song is heard. Far off, a military procession passes. The pictures are disconnected, like those which float through the mind when one is falling asleep.

"The fourth movement: If you truly find no joy within yourself, look for it in others. Go to the people. See—they know how to make the best of their time, how to give themselves up to pleasure. A peasant festival is depicted. No sooner do you forget yourself in this spectacle of others' joy, than the merciless 'Fatum' reappears to remind you of yourself. But the others are indifferent to you; they do not so much as turn their heads toward your loneliness and sadness. Oh, how gay they are! And how fortunate to be ruled by such simple, immediate feelings. Here one sees the existence of simple, deep joys; enter into them, and life will be bearable."