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Tchaikovsky

Pathétique Symphony

BOSTON SYMPHONY ORCHESTRA...PIERRE MONTEUX



Tchaikovsky Symphony No. 6, in B Minor, Op. 74 ("Pathétique")

Boston Symphony Orchestra

Pierre Monteux, Conductor



While in St. Petersburg, Peter Ilich Tchaikovsky had arranged to conduct his new Symphony (No. 6) in Moscow. He was ready to leave St. Petersburg when illness overtook him. He died on November 6, 1893, of cholera.

The mysterious program for the Symphony, which the composer never disclosed to anyone, later became the subject of much speculation. Some indications of what the composer might have had in mind were brought to light some time afterwards by the study of Tchaikovsky's correspondence and papers. Interesting is a short note jotted down by the composer in his hasty, nervous handwriting on the back of a manuscript. The note written between 1890 and 1892, reads:

"The following is a sketch of the symphony — Life! The first movement — all impetus, confidence, thirst for action. Must be short. (Finale — death — the result of destruction) (2nd movement — love; 3 — disillusionment; 4 — dies away towards the end, also short.)" Some Russian musicologists think that these are Tchaikovsky's early ideas which eventually developed into the program of the Sixth Symphony.

Revealing also is the composer's letter to the Grand Duke Constantine of Russia, who had suggested the poem Requiem by Apoukhin as a suitable piece of poetry for musical interpretation. Declining the suggestion, Tchaikovsky explained:

"What makes me hesitant is that my last symphony . . . is dominated by a mood which comes very close to that of the Requiem. It seems to me that this symphony has turned out to be a good work, and I am afraid I might repeat myself if I immediately began to work on a composition which is akin in character and spirit to the preceding one."

Tchaikovsky's correspondence of the year 1893 traces the progress of this last Symphony, the "Pathétique," from conception to performance.

Through his letters to his brother Modeste, his nephew Vladimir Davidov, his publisher P. Jurgenson, and the Grand Duke Constantine of Russia the composer's idea, if not his precise programmatic intent for his last symphony, emerges.

Working from the original Russian, Mr. Nicolai Rabeneck has excerpted such elements of the correspondence as have direct bearing on the composition of the "Pathétique" Symphony.

To Vladimir Davidov February 22, 1893

"... Just as I was starting on my journey [a visit to Paris in December, 1892] the idea of another symphony came to me, this time of a program symphony, but with a program that will remain unknown to all; let them keep on guessing, while the symphony will bear the name 'The Program Symphony' (No. 6). This program is wholly penetrated by subjective feelings; when composing it in my mind during my wanderings, I was often shedding bitter tears. Now, having returned home, I settled down to write sketches, and work developed with such ardor and speed that in less than four days the entire first movement was finished, and in my mind I had a clear outline of the other movements. . . ."

To Vladimir Davidov August 15, 1893

"The Symphony which I intended to dedicate to you — although I have now changed my mind [This was merely a playful threat because his nephew had neglected to answer his letters.] — is progressing. I am very pleased with its contents, but I am not pleased, or better to say, not altogether pleased with its orchestration. It somehow takes shape not quite as I had imagined it. I should not be surprised at all if my symphony will get abusive notices and little appreciation — I am used to this. But I am positive in holding it to be the best and above all, the 'most genuinely sincere' of all my works. I love it as I have never loved any of my other musical offsprings."

Modeste Tchaikovsky relates:

"The morning after the concert [the public première of the Symphony in St. Petersburg, October 28th, conducted by the composer] I found my brother sitting at the breakfast table with the score of the Symphony before him. He had agreed to send it to Jurgenson in Moscow that very day, and could not decide upon a

title. He did not wish to designate it merely by a number, and had abandoned his original intention of calling it 'a program Symphony.' 'Why program,' he said, 'since I do not intend to expound any meaning?' I suggested 'tragic Symphony' as an appropriate title. But this did not please him either. I left the room while Peter Ilich was still in a state of indecision. Suddenly the word 'pathetic' occurred to me, and I returned to suggest it. I remember, as though it were yesterday, how my brother exclaimed: 'Bravo, Modeste, splendid! Pathetic!' Then and there, in my presence, he added to the score the title by which the Symphony has always been known."

To P. Jurgenson October 30, 1893

"With this symphony things happen in a strange way. The public did not really dislike the work, but was somewhat perplexed by it. As far as I am concerned, I am more proud of it than of any other work of mine. However, we shall soon talk this over, as I shall be in Moscow on Saturday."

A week later Peter Ilich Tchaikovsky was dead.

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