Symphonic Analysis:Symphony No. 4 In F Minor By Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky Essay, Research Paper

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CHAPTER

BIOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION

Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky was born in Votkinsk, the Viatka District in Russia on May 7, 1840 to a Russian miner and a mother of French origin. During his early life, Tchaikovsky did receive some musical training from a French governess in the form of piano lessons, but the training did not continue. As a young child, Tchaikovsky’s family moved to St. Petersburg because his father had been given the position of a government mining official there. In St. Petersburg, he was sent to school to study the law and prepare for a career there, but he continued his musical training in his own time. By improvising on the piano, Tchaikovsky was not only able to improve his skill, but it was in the course of his practices that gave him a great love of music. He wouldn’t again train formally in music until after his graduation from law school in 1859.

In 1861, he had taken a job as a clerk in the Ministry of Justice in St. Petersburg when he enrolled in the newly formed St. Petersburg Conservatory to continue his learning. He began to study composition under the direction of Anton Rubinstein, a highly celebrated pianist and composer; also, he was the director of the conservatory. Rubinstein was impressed by Tchaikovsky and once commented that while he was a bit careless, the young man was “definitely talented.” This commentary from his instructor inspired Tchaikovsky to “give up his day job”, so to speak, and become a full time student of the conservatory. Tchaikovsky graduated in 1865 and immediately received the position of Professor of Harmony in the new Moscow Conservatory. It was in this position that he started to compose. He began by composing some minor overtures, quartets, and one large symphony. In 1866 that he suffered from his first nervous breakdown brought on the stress of overwork on his First Symphony. His early works were to include two other symphonies, the violin concerto, and the Piano Concerto in B flat Minor.

During his years in Moscow, Tchaikovsky was able to teach, compose, write, travel, and associate with other composers of the time. With one of those, Balakirev, a member of a group of Russian composers known as “the Five”, he formed a close friendship, and from him he gained the idea for the fantasy overture Romeo and Juliet. But the relationship between him and the Five soured, and he even later parodied in one of ballets their use of certain folk melodies over and over again. Although Tchaikovsky was enjoying life in Moscow among his composer friends, he found himself constantly in periods of deep depressions and unhappiness. The largest contributor to his bouts of depression and sadness was his self-hatred and guilt that he had from carrying a heavy secret: Tchaikovsky was gay.

In 1876, Tchaikovsky entered into a correspondence relationship with a wealthy widow, Madame Nedezhda von Meck, who was an admirer of his music. First off, she merely commissioned works for him to compose and gave him rather nice payments for the music, but eventually, Madame von Meck became his patron by providing him with six thousand roubles annually. Interestingly enough, she agree to maintain this support only under one condition: they were to never meet. For the next thirteen years, this unique relationship allowed Tchaikovsky to dedicate his life to music, compose, perform, and, in general, work on his music without ever the worry of finance. During those years, the letters that the two shared were intense and personal, it could even be said that the two had gained a great love for one another. After thirteen years, Madame von Meck ended her patronage and the relationship as well, abruptly in 1890. No explanation was ever offered as to why, and while Tchaikovsky was not hurt financially by this (he had become very well off due to his music career and had even gained a life pension from the Czar of Russia), it hurt him emotionally very deeply.

Driven by feelings of self-loathing and guilt over his homosexuality, Tchaikovsky attempted to “cure” himself by marrying Antonia Milyukova in 1877, a student at the Moscow Conservatory where he taught. Apparently she herself was mentally unstable, and this, combined with the complexities of Tchaikovsky’s mental state, turned the marriage into an instant disaster that didn’t even last three months. As a result, Tchaikovsky fled back to St. Petersburg, attempted suicide, and had another nervous breakdown. It took him several months before he was stable enough to again to compose, after which he resigned his post at the Moscow Conservatory in 1878. He maintained his St. Petersburg residence the remainder of his life.

During this later part of his life, Tchaikovsky was able to travel through Europe and America, gaining in popularity and wealth. It was during these years that wrote almost all of his more well known music, including the 1812 Overture, the Sixth Symphony Pathetique, and probably the most famous ballet of all time, The Nutcracker. Tchaikovsky died in St. Petersburg in 1893 of Cholera that he contracted from drinking some contaminated water. Some say that it was on purpose in order to commit suicide over the threat of exposure of his homosexuality, but that is perhaps something that the world will never know.

During his lifetime, Tchaikovsky composed some of the most memorable music of all time. In my life, there were always three names that I would recognize when it came to classical music: Beethoven, Mozart, and Tchaikovsky. He is most famous for his two ballets The Nutcracker and Swan Lake and if I had to put him in a category, it would be in the ballet, but the music that Tchaikovsky loved the most had to be the symphony. This is evidenced most clearly in his comment on his Sixth Symphony or better known as the Pathetique Symphony. He said, “I love it as I have never loved any one of my musical offspring.” Tchaikovsky works include concertos for both violin and piano, symphonies, operas, quartets, ballets, and overtures. His music was always filled with passion and emotion. While he didn’t opt for the gigantic orchestras of the time, like his fellow composers, Tchaikovsky concentrated on adding color to his music, which he was extremely successful at. Truly, Tchaikovsky was one of the greatest composers of the Romantic Period, and his music will continue to delight audiences for years to come.

CHAPTER

SYMPHONY IN F MINOR: PERSONAL LISTENING

The first movement of the symphony starts out in almost an official style, more like a march. This initially leads one to think that the piece is going to turn out to be a more militaristic type of music with a lot of rigid melodies, confined to a certain space or tone or something like that. But Tchaikovsky doesn’t do that. He starts that way, then suddenly drops all of the crescendo and forte to make the music softer and slower. It was hard at first to describe my feelings about this particular piece up to this point because in my head, I hadn’t visualized any type of mental imagery to follow the music along with. It took me a couple of listenings to really get a picture or idea of that first movement. One thing that I really didn’t notice until after the first few times through was the tempo of the first movement. It stays quite fast through the whole thing. It wasn’t until the fifth or sixth listening of the piece that the first movement began to take on shape in my mind. To me, it began to sound like a chase, someone chasing someone else. It this chase, the person fleeing starts out running to get away from his pursuer, pauses for a moment to rest, then the chase once again resumes. About five minutes into the piece, the music tells me that the individual who was running gave his pursuer the slip and is very happy and even starts to celebrate a little. The whole first movement goes on like this, with periods of fast tempo, then slowing down a bit, and once again building to that fast tempo. I can definitely see the outpouring of emotion that Tchaikovsky put into this first movement.

The second movement just starts off slow and relaxing, a real breather when compared to the first. It almost seems like a lullaby, slowly relaxing the listeners and putting them into a kind of a somber, tranquil mood. Even with all the crescendos and decrescendos that are woven into the piece, it never really seems to lose that lullaby type feeling to it. One thing that I didn’t realize at first about this movement is that it is not a ‘happy’ type of lullaby, but it has a sadness and darkness to it. I’m not surprised by that after studying the life of Tchaikovsky. The mood of the piece most likely is reflecting the turmoil that he was experiencing at this point in his life. Out of all the movements, I find that I like this one the most. The second movement is usually the one that I liked to put on at night when I needed to relax enough to go to sleep–worked better than a glass of warm milk.

For awhile the beginning of the third movement had me a little confused as to why Tchaikovsky began it this way with the plucking of all the strings like he did, but after listening to the second movement, I began to see how the two could really be used together. The second movement is the lullaby to put the audience to sleep, and the third could be the pixies dancing in their heads or about the room as they slept. I could just see a bunch of little fairies dancing around the room and playing to the music while the people slept.

In the third and final movement Tchaikovsky really starts out loud, as if to wake up his audience. It was after finally listening to the final and the first movements separately that I really could gain a mental picture of the whole. As an example, I picture a man who is running from someone and we don’t know why. Throughout the entire first movement, we hear his pursuit-the ducking, hiding, resting, then the resuming of the chase. We move into the second movement, and night has fallen. Our man is going to sleep, lulled by the night music all around. This is never really a happy tune, because in the back of the man’s mind is the chase. We move into the third movement, of which I will not elaborate, because I have done so previously. In the forth and final movement, morning comes and the chase resumes. The pursuer in close on the man’s heels and he is caught and escapes several times. The listenercan almost taste the tension and the excitement mount as Tchaikovsky continually builds and builds and make the music louder and louder until, at last, the man escapes and it is over.

CHAPTER

SYMPHONY IN F MINOR: GENERAL INFO AND DISCUSSION

The Symphony in F Minor is a standard four movement piece written, obviously, in the key of F minor. Tchaikovsky composed this piece between 1877 and 78. He wrote it during the time of his disastrous marriage to Antonia Milyukova. Because of this, one can assume that the great passions and contrasts that are written into the symphony are a result of his marriage. But this might not be completely true, because it is rumored that the piece is actually dedicated to his patron Madame von Meck. Tchaikovsky himself described it as a “musical confession of the soul.”4 The information concerning the first performance of the Forth Symphony is very sketchy, but there are some things that can assumed. For instance, one can assume that the piece was first performed in St Petersburg, since that is to where Tchaikovsky fled after his marriage fell apart, and that Tchaikovsky was the conductor since that was commonplace for the style period. As to greater detail, due to lack of information, it is just not possible.

FIRST MOVEMENT:

The first movement of the Forth Symphony is the longest of the four movements. It starts out with the brass instruments in a sort of brass fanfare with a fast tempo to move the music along. I found that throughout this piece, Tchaikovsky really makes use of the crescendos and decrescendos and, in fact, I would have to say that this is probably the element for which impacts the movement the most. He really makes large jumps between loud and soft because of the heavy use of the horns in this movement. The other element that impacts the most is the tempo. He never separates the two. For example, every time the music goes soft, the tempo slows down and every time that the loud is getting louder, the tempo is picking back up. Now this is just in general and there are a few rare times in this movement that the tempo changes aren’t constant with this, but for the most part, Tchaikovsky follows this pattern of soft-slow and loud-fast through the first movement. I had mentioned before in the personal listening portion of this paper that to me the combined elements of the first movement that reminded me of a person being chased. It was Tchaikovsky’s use of this soft-slow, loud-fast pattern that lead me to this picture. I think that he used this for the first movement as a way of catching his audience’s attention and holding on to it. It wasn’t just a flash in the pan and then they could go back to what they were doing before, but he would grab your attention, allow you to relax a bit, then pull you back once again. This particular movement is very typical of the Romantic style period because of it’s sharp contrasts and musical color. You can really feel the emotions of Tchaikovsky seeping through his music. Overall I would have to say that this is a very tumultuous pieces because of it’s many contrasting elements.

SECOND MOVEMENT:

In the second movement, Tchaikovsky departs from the sporadic jumps in elements that was the first movement to a softer and gentler style of music. We have this entire piece that is kind of slow, soft, relaxing and doesn’t really have a lot of embellishment, but does contain much color, making it the most easy to listen to of the four movements. The element that I would have to say has the greatest effect on the whole piece has to be the mood. Through the entire movement, it has this really tragically sad feeling, like that of someone crying. Nothing really to extreme, like someone died, but just sadness, isolation, loneliness, all feelings that I’m sure Tchaikovsky was feeling at the time he wrote this. The two other elements that impressed me is the harmony and texture of the piece. I enjoy the harmony of this movement because of how Tchaikovsky blends his instruments together at this point almost providing a real flowing sound that relaxes and holds your attention at the same time. The texture to me reminds me a smooth piece of silk flowing through my hands, feeling very soft but having an enduring quality at the same time. I feel Tchaikovsky was really searching for something through his music at this point. If I could put one word to describe the second movement, it would be thoughtful.

THIRD MOVEMENT:

The third movement is the softest, shortest and most unconventional of the four movements. The continual plucking of the strings dominates the entire movement which does two things for it; it makes this a strings intensive piece and creates a playful mood. I would have to think that the continual plucking of the string and repetitious notes played by the winds makes repetition the most influential element of the third movement. I compared the instrumentation of this particular piece with that of pixies dancing across a sleeping audience or person earlier on in the paper and I feel that this is the idea which Tchaikovsky is trying to portray. The only other influence on the music of the third movement is the rhythm, because it’s the only element throughout the piece that changes often enough to be of an influence. The mood, dynamics, melody, and harmony all pretty much stay at the same level throughout. But, still, even with all that, the third movement hasn’t deviated from the rest of the symphony and still provides a necessary part to the storyline that it’s been following all along. It brings in that dreamlike quality that is still typical of the Romantic period.

FOURTH MOVEMENT:

So now it’s time for the grand finale. Here, Tchaikovsky returns to that pattern of Dynamics that he established in the first movement of the loud vs soft and fast vs slow. He follows this pattern a little more exactly in this movement than he did in the first, giving the Dynamics, once again, the most influence. Mood is in second almost right behind Dynamics. The changes of Mood come as fast and furious as they did in the first movement. But what makes this so different from the first movement is firstly, the overall mood is lighter, happier than in the first movement. Next, Tchaikovsky prepares you for the ending by a continual building and building of the music until the grand finale. It’s almost as if you see it coming. Again a typical romantic structure: filled with emotion, change, fast music, and lots of sound.

OVERALL EFFECT:

Now, after being able to step back and look at the symphony as a whole, I think some very interesting things happen. Firstly, I noticed that in dynamics and musical content, the first and fourth movements are the most similar and the second and third the most similar. Next along those same lines, when you look at the moods of the movements, you notice that the first and second movements have similar moods and, likewise, the third and fourth movements have similar moods. I find that what this does to the symphony is unifies it. Because the mixture of similarities, you don’t end with a first half, second half, or any other such arrangement. It’s like a continual story, as I mentioned earlier, just flowing on to the next piece. In the context of the story that I mentioned at the first of the paper, we start out with this sort of military march type sound to the first movement, but within that movement, the mood changes and the pace changes too. The first movement has that anxious feel to it. Like I said, you can almost imagine this prisoner being marched off to jail when suddenly he makes a break for it and runs off. The rest of the entire first movement is spent in that chase. Hence the anxious mood and sudden tempo changes. This mood carries over into the second movement as night falls and the prisoner has finally dodged his captors for now. I can imagine him being lulled to sleep by the night music, only to wake up at every little noise around him. The mood is sad, thoughtful, heavy. The tempo is slow and resting. Now in the third, things change. The prisoner is asleep and dreaming. Night dances all around him and comforts him while he sleeps. The mood changes from sad to playful as the night goes on. The fourth brings us in and the prisoner is up and running, faster and faster, ever needing to get away. Here is the building, the continual crescendo. In addition, the good night’s rest and his current situation of being on the run with his captors not knowing where he is has made the mood lighter, more joyous. I can really feel the happiness come from this final movement. Now, I know that I’ve changed the story slightly, but I think that these changes illustrate how each movement, though slightly different every time, adds to the overall work. The movements, while enjoyable to listen to, would sound uncompleted and lacking something without the rest of the symphony. Personally, I have come to enjoy and love this particular work.

Tchaikovsky wrote this symphony during the most difficult time of his life, but each movement, though filled at times with total turmoil and confusion, just adds to and compliments the rest. This level of quality of composition shows the kind of talent that Tchaikovsky had at his command. I feel that he truly deserves his place among the master composers of the Romantic Period.

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Internet Address: WWW.IDA.MS.SE/IDA/~A94JOHAL/MUSIC/TCHAIKOV.HTML

Internet Public Library, Music History 101: Tchaikovsky

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