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### **PETER ILYITCH TCHAIKOVSKY**

Peter Ilyitch Tchaikovsky, born in Kamsko-Votnsk in the district of Viatka on May 7, 1840, was the son of a mining engineer. Although he began piano instruction at the age of five and showed signs of musical precociousness, a musical career was not anticipated at that time. In 1850, he was enrolled in the preparatory class of the School of Jurisprudence when his family moved to St. Petersburg. He was admitted to the School of Jurisprudence in 1852, and while he was still a student there, he composed a canzonetta that became his first published work.

In 1859, he completed his course of study and took a post as a clerk in the Ministry of Justice, but he continued to pursue musical studies, including voice, thoroughbass and composition. He resigned from his post in 1863 and became a full-time student at the St. Petersburg Conservatory, directed by Anton Rubinstein. It was during this period that he made his debut as a conductor and composed *The Storm*, his only student composition to be heard with any frequency today. In it, he already exhibited stylistic elements prominent in his later works, including the influence of Russian folk-melody, a command of Western compositional techniques and a flair for brilliant orchestration. Even before his graduation in 1865, he was offered a position as teacher of harmony at what was to become the Moscow Conservatory. In 1866, he moved to Moscow. There he came under the influence of Anton's brother Nikolai Rubinstein and met Peter Jurgenson, who would eventually become his publisher.

His *First Symphony*, begun in 1866, proved to be a difficult and laborious exercise for Tchaikovsky, who found the structural demands of the symphonic sonata form incompatible with his own style. It was not performed until 1869, but it was well received. His began first opera, *Voyevoda*, in 1867, the year in which he met Berlioz and Balakirev, leader of the nationalistic movement in Russian

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music. Balakirev conducted the first St. Petersburg performance of Tchaikovsky's symphonic fantasia *Fatum*, composed in 1868. Tchaikovsky later destroyed the work, as he would several others, but it was eventually reconstructed. Balakirev's influence was also felt in Tchaikovsky's first masterpiece, *Romeo and Juliet*, which he rewrote several times at Balakirev's suggestion.

From 1870 to 1874, Tchaikovsky became increasingly interested in nationalistic music, although his conservatory training and familiarity with Western techniques kept him outside the circle of "The Mighty Five" (Balakirev, Cui, Borodin, Mussorgsky and Rimsky-Korsakov). His nationalistic tendencies came to a peak with the opera *Vakula the Smith*, first staged in 1876, by which time his infatuation with nationalism in music had declined.

He wrote his first music for solo instrument and orchestra from 1874 to 1877, including his celebrated *First Piano Concerto* (1875), and in 1875–76 composed his first ballet, *Swan Lake*. The first performance in 1877 was considered a failure, based less upon Tchaikovsky's score (which was severely cut and further compromised with interpolations by other composers) than by a poor performance and mediocre physical production. *Swan Lake* was later revived with new choreography by Petipa and Ivanov in 1895, at which time it was recognized as a masterpiece of the ballet repertoire.

Around the end of 1876, Tchaikovsky began to receive financial support from a wealthy widow, Nadezhda von Meck, who was to remain his devoted patroness for the next 14 years. With a new found financial security, Tchaikovsky embarked upon a period of incredible musical fecundity, producing such cornerstones of the international repertoire as his *Fourth Symphony*, the violin concerto and the opera *Eugene Onegin*.

Most of his compositions from the years 1878–84 have not proved as enduring, although his stature in Russia continued to grow, as exemplified by two events in 1884: his opera *Mazeppa* was given concurrent productions in St. Petersburg and Moscow and he was awarded the Order of St. Vladimir by the Tsar.

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In 1887, Tchaikovsky undertook his first foreign tour as a conductor, during which he met such notables as Brahms and Grieg. It was almost immediately after composing his *Fifth Symphony* in 1888 that he began work on his second ballet, *The Sleeping Beauty*. The work was given an elaborate premiere and was well received, but the public reaction did not meet the expectations of the composer, choreographer (Petipa) and designer-impresario (Vsevolozhsky), and it was to be some years before the work was recognized as one of the pinnacles of classical ballet.

Tchaikovsky went on without pause to compose the opera *The Queen of Spades*, which received a successful premiere in 1890 and, along with *Eugene Onegin*, became an international repertory item. Its success brought about a commission from the Imperial Theatre for two one-act works, the opera *Iolanta* and the ballet *The Nutcracker*, one of his most enduringly popular works despite its disappointing reception at its 1892 premiere.

Tchaikovsky's *Sixth Symphony*, his most profoundly pessimistic work, was first performed October 28, 1893. Nine days later, he died. His death is universally considered to have been a suicide, but the circumstances leading to it have become a musicological controversy that is yet to be resolved.

Once considered by his contemporaries to be too Western in his style, Tchaikovsky was later lionized by Igor Stravinsky as the most Russian of Russian composers. His greatest strength, his incomparable gift for melody, was also responsible for his difficulty in composing within the structures of the German school of composition, and his blatant emotionalism has alienated some commentators. Nonetheless, he is today one of the most popular of all composers, and he created masterpieces in every genre. His music seems uniquely suited to ballet, with its inexhaustible stream of melody, an instinctive sense of movement considered ideal for the human body, and an irresistible rhythmic pulse and brilliant orchestration. It is no coincidence that all three of his ballets are firmly entrenched in the international repertoire.