

# TCHAIKOVSKY

Symphony No. 6 *Pathétique*  
Serenade for Strings Op. 48



Royal Philharmonic Orchestra  
DANIELE GATTI



## Acknowledgments

Photos of Daniele Gatti by Primo Gnani

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THORSTEN STEDER

PIOTR ILYICH  
**TCHAIKOVSKY** (1840–1893)

**Symphony No. 6 in B minor, "Pathétique" Op. 74 44:27**

- |          |     |                             |       |
|----------|-----|-----------------------------|-------|
| <b>1</b> | I   | Adagio – Allegro non troppo | 17:59 |
| <b>2</b> | II  | Allegro con grazia          | 7:09  |
| <b>3</b> | III | Allegro molto vivace        | 8:31  |
| <b>4</b> | IV  | Finale: Adagio lamentoso    | 10:48 |

**Serenade for Strings in C major, Op. 48 31:42**

- |          |     |                            |      |
|----------|-----|----------------------------|------|
| <b>5</b> | I   | Pezzo in forma di Sonatina | 9:53 |
| <b>6</b> | II  | Walzer                     | 4:03 |
| <b>7</b> | III | Élégie                     | 9:58 |
| <b>8</b> | IV  | Finale: Tema Russo         | 7:49 |

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**DANIELE GATTI**

# TCHAIKOVSKY Symphony No. 6

THE CONFLICT between public persona and private feelings was never more deeply felt than by Tchaikovsky in his life's final years, and never expressed with greater poignancy than in the *Pathétique* Symphony. Or so we've been led to believe. (For a variety of interpretations, see *Tchaikovsky: A Self-Portrait*, by Vladimir Volkoff, p. 322ff, Robert Hale & Co., London, 1985.)

"Tchaikovsky Agonistes," a composer tormented by his homosexuality, is a 20th-century invention. While not without concerns about his emotional peace of mind – and who can say otherwise? – the composer's personal predilections were neither flaunted nor hidden. If homosexuality was not embraced by Imperial Russia, it was tolerated both by members of the Romanov Court and the musical establishment.

Outwardly, Tchaikovsky's last years were triumphant. In 1892, the Académie Française elected him a member and Cambridge University chose him to receive an honorary Doctorate of Music. His works were performed throughout the Continent, and his career as guest conductor was flourishing, with engagements booked into May of 1894.

Most important, perhaps, he continued to compose prolifically. For the Mariinsky stage he created *Pique Dame* in 1890, *Iolanta* in 1891, and *The Nutcracker* in 1892, and his orchestral scores included the symphonic ballad *Voyevoda* in 1890-91 and the *Pathétique* Symphony in 1893, his last completed work.

For the *Pathétique* and its surrounding mystique, Tchaikovsky himself set the stage. While planning it, he wrote to Vladimir 'Bob' Davydov, his nephew and lover and the Symphony's dedicatee: "During my stay in Paris last December I had the idea of writing a program symphony; but to a program that should remain an enigma for everyone but myself; let them try and guess it! For my part, I intend to call it simply 'Program Symphony.' The theme of it is full of subjective feeling, so much so that as I was mentally composing it during the journey, I frequently shed tears..."

Unlike his earliest three symphonies, where he worked toward the development of an individual symphonic style, and unlike the more overtly emotional Fourth and Fifth, where triumphant optimism wins the day, the *Pathétique* was Tchaikovsky's *Sturm und Drang*. (The Symphony's title came not from the composer but from his brother Modest, and connotes the sense of 'impassioned,' as in Beethoven's *Appassionata* Sonata, and not the more literal 'symphony of suffering,' as in 'symphonie pathétique.') (For the biographical information above, see "Tchaikovsky: A Life Reconsidered," by Alexander Poznansky, in *Tchaikovsky and His World*, ed. Leslie Kearney, Princeton University Press, Princeton, NJ, 1998.)

But what was the program Tchaikovsky had in mind, the program that he would not reveal to his audiences, but suggested, as he wrote to Bob, "Let them try and guess it!"?

Here is my theory: It is not the composer's supposed torment caused by his sexual orientation, as we usually are told, but a restless disaffection he felt in his later years, a disaffection that mirrored that of Manfred, Byron's great Romantic hero.

Tchaikovsky knew Manfred well, having portrayed him once before, in the *Manfred Symphony* of 1885. Significantly, the *Manfred Symphony* and the *Pathétique* are the only symphonic works ever composed by Tchaikovsky in the key of B minor.

As imagined by Byron, Manfred represented "a compelling mass of contradictions... at once the hero, the villain, the 'every man' and the demigod," a character "who has grown prematurely old through excesses of study, toil, pleasure, weariness, disease, and through a broken heart" (from Byron, *Complete Works*, ed. Thomas Moore, Boston: Crosby, Nichols, Lee & Co., 1860). As depicted by Tchaikovsky in his *Manfred Symphony*, the suffering is pro forma. In the *Pathétique* it feels authentic.

In the years leading up to the *Pathétique*, as his letters make clear, Tchaikovsky experienced both physical and psychological burdens – the deprivations due to aging, the pain caused by the death of close friends, the rupture of his fourteen-year friendship with his patron and intimate Nadezhda von Meck, and the emotional loneliness and sexual longing felt for Bob when he, Tchaikovsky, was pursuing his far-flung international career. One easily can imagine that Tchaikovsky remembered Byron's restless, troubled hero, and the *Pathétique*, I suggest, is a self-portrait with Manfred in mind.

Work on the *Pathétique* began in February, 1893, and it was completed by the end of August. It was premiered on October 28 and nine days later Tchaikovsky died (Poznansky, op. cit., p. 50). The near con-junction of these events and the rumors surrounding the cause of death – which was from ailments due to cholera (Poznansky, p. 48) – led the work to be cloaked in an aura of intrigue and to fanciful speculation that the composer – "Tchaikovsky Agonistes" – created the work as a premonition of his own demise, or perhaps as his requiem (*Grove*, p. 628).

Tchaikovsky had sketched a brief schema for the Symphony (which recalls the one he wrote for his Fifth) and it shows the composer to be far more concerned with the cycle of life than obsessed with his pending demise. Death, without doubt, is dealt with here, as it was not in the Fourth or Fifth Symphonies, but it is dealt with as an organic end to life.

According to Tchaikovsky's schema, "The ultimate essence of the plan of the symphony is LIFE. First movement – all impulsive passion, confidence. Thirst for activity. Must be short. (Finale: DEATH – result of collapse.) Second movement – love; third – disappointments; fourth ends dying away (also short)." Throughout the composition, polarities abound. With its emphasis on 'LIFE' and 'DEATH,' the *Pathétique* presents a scenario of oppositions and is Tchaikovsky's most vivid symphonic score. Dynamically, the music ranges more widely than in any other of his symphonies, from *ffff* (at the climax of the first movement, at m. 299) to *pppppp* (at m. 160, and not *ppppp* as the *New Grove Dictionary* incorrectly states; Vol. 18, Tchaikovsky article, p. 626).

Formally, it juxtaposes two movements of gravity with two of insouciance, sandwiching a waltz and a march, dances best suited to the ballet stage, with outer movements of utmost earnestness. Theatrically, it embraces both the bathetic and the bold; few melodies have been more widely reviled than the second theme of the opening movement, but even those who belittle it are likely to be affected, in the same movement, by the introduction (at m. 161ff) to the fugal development, whose menacing, violent air suggests the imminent appearance of the malevolent Rothbart from *Swan Lake*.

Rhythmically, as well, the music displays extremes, embracing both phrases of the utmost placidity, none more docile than the opening movement's second theme, as well as long stretches where phrases fight against the bar line, contradicting the implied and expected meters. You hear this almost immediately at the outset of the opening *Allegro non troppo* (m. 21ff), where quirky phrasing causes the composer to insert a single measure of two beats (m. 30) to help regain ballast. The fix, however, is temporary, and much of the opening movement is metrically off-kilter. In this context, the unruffled second theme appears as a corrective.

Though necessarily sketchy, Tchaikovsky's schema for his Symphony remains instructive. In the opening movement, it is perhaps not too fanciful to imagine that "Passion, confidence (and activity)" develop with the growth of a motivic kernel that is the interval of a second. A solo bassoon grows this kernel with three successive statements of an embryonic theme, each starting a note higher than the previous iteration. Beneath the bassoon, double-basses crawl downward by semitones, and these details are telling; the bassoon motto, expanded and exploited, provides the movement's thematic grist, and the descent of the double-bass is echoed and extended in the valedictory processional for unison strings that ends the first movement (mm. 335–351), and it proves consequential at the Symphony's end, as well.

The movement's second theme also gains in confidence over the course of the movement, revealing itself more fully with each appearance. Initially, it seems reticent (m. 89ff); it is played by muted violins (in their middle register) and muted cellos and set against a cushion of half-notes sounded by low woodwinds and brass; D major (the relative major of the B-minor tonic) is the key.

When we hear it again (at m. 130ff, and again in D major), it's as if a scrim has been lifted; first and second violins, along with the cellos, again take the lead, but the mutes are now gone and the first violins, soaring an octave above the staff, sound more brilliant; against this theme, a full complement of woodwinds and horns play a triplet-figure accompaniment, which, heard against the melody's steady quarter-note gait, creates an underlying animation that is new.

When the theme makes its last appearance (m. 305ff), it is in bright B major (the tonic's major mode), and the key's luminosity is reinforced by the scoring; first and second violins, playing in octaves, are joined by three flutes, in octaves as well.

Of the Symphony's middle movements, the five-step waltz, with its attendant trio, is the more idiosyncratic. This variation on the conventional three-four waltz had been enjoyed in the ballroom for decades, but Tchaikovsky was apparently the first composer to bring it into the concert hall. The work is both novel and artful. From Tchaikovsky the ballet composer, we would expect a waltz of perfect form and proportion, and from Tchaikovsky the symphonist, we would expect a movement of harmonic subtlety, and indeed, we get both. It is a graceful interlude in D major, but note the B-minor trio, where Tchaikovsky creates a nice tension with repeated Ds in the lowest voices (the bassoons, double-basses, and tympani), which always are reminding us of the waltz's true home of D major.

The third-movement march is a quick-step built with prominent intervals of the fourth, but its most striking characteristic is how slow it is to state its subject. The first 70 measures are build-up, where thematic snippets are sketchily presented before other snippets appear. Animating it all is the rhythm of triplets. (They are the triplets of the tarantella, which could have led this movement in a different direction.) Only at measure 71 does the march theme present itself properly, and in a wonderfully understated way, with clarinets playing *piano* and paired horns *pianissimo* beneath them.

A march theme built on fourths with an accompaniment of triplets – “this is the whole substance of a brilliantly sustained movement that drives towards ever greater tension without ever developing mood or enriching itself, until finally it reaches the limits of orchestral excitement and is spent” (John Warrack, *Tchaikovsky Symphonies and Concertos*, p. 37, University of Washington Press, Seattle, 1971).

These movements together provide a perfect foil for the Finale, marked *Adagio lamentoso*, whose deep grief is palpable. The opening theme, which speaks of anguish (in B minor), and the second theme (m. 38ff), which conveys consolation (in D major), are built with consecutive notes of a descending scale (the first theme from F-sharp down to B, the second theme from D down to A). Both echo, however unconsciously, the downward scalar motion in the Symphony's opening measures, and this aspect of the work lends it audible formal unity.

The development of these themes is the stuff of high drama, and the tragedy foreshadowed at the Symphony's outset is here fulfilled. Tchaikovsky paints his scenario with brilliant insights. Always inventive in orchestration, he tinges this movement with two masterstrokes. At the moment of greatest despondency, when the opening theme is stuck in frustration (m. 126 ff), first sounded, then repeated and repeated again, the composer asks his low horns (the second and fourth in the section) to play their sustained pedal notes 'stopped,' and the buzzing that results, which in Mahler would sound sardonic, here sounds a cacophonous note of hopelessness.

A moment later, when this passage ends in resignation, we hear the Symphony's sole use of the tam-tam (m. 137ff), which ushers us to a different plane. As the gong's sound rises and reverberates, the lowest brass prepare us for the Symphony's last gasp (m. 147ff). Unison violins, muted and in the middle register, play repetitions of the second theme (now sounding dirge-like in a dark B minor) and underneath them, like a heartbeat, syncopated triplet figures pulse in the double-basses. After the theme concludes, the triplet figures persist, and as they lose their strength, slowing in tempo and weakening in sound, the Symphony's life ebbs away.

In the autumn of 1881, Tchaikovsky composed both the *Serenade for Strings*, Opus 48, and the *1812 Festival Overture*, Opus 49, and the former is as personal as the latter is public. It was written “from inner compulsion... (and) is Tchaikovsky's equivalent of an 18th-century divertimento, inhabiting a world not so far removed from that of his Rococo pastiches” (*Grove*, Tchaikovsky article, vol. 18, p. 620). Gracious, graceful music, the *Serenade* is most closely associated with the dance – it was set by George Balanchine in his eponymous ballet – but it richly deserves more frequent performance in the concert hall.

– GEORGE GELLES

## Daniele Gatti *music director*



Considered the 'foremost conductor of his generation,' Italian conductor Daniele Gatti has galvanized the music world with his dramatic and instinctive style. A charismatic maestro, he demonstrates an equal mastery of the orchestra and the opera stage, delivering consistently probing interpretations imbued with fire and refined sensitivity.

Music Director of the Royal Philharmonic Orchestra since 1996, Gatti has inspired audiences and critics alike with his enraptured performances; his recordings have attracted enthusiastic notices. Since 1998, Gatti is also Music Director of Bologna's opera house, the Teatro Comunale, and has conducted opera to great acclaim the world over.

A native of Milan, Daniele Gatti studied piano and violin at the Giuseppe Verdi Conservatory, earning his degree in composition and conducting. Following his La Scala debut at the age of 27, he led productions at Venice's Teatro La Fenice, the Chicago Lyric Opera, Berlin Staatsoper and New York's Metropolitan Opera. Maestro Gatti was Music Director of Accademia Nazionale di Santa Cecilia in Rome from 1992 to 1997 as well as Principal Guest Conductor of the Royal Opera House, Covent Garden from 1995 to 1997.

He made his Carnegie Hall debut in the 1989/90 season with the American Symphony Orchestra, and has since led most of the world's major orchestras. He has become a favourite of audiences in Chicago where he first conducted the Chicago Symphony in 1994, returning every other season since. Gatti's 1996 debut with the New York Philharmonic was hailed as a "remarkable performance" (*The New York Times*) and led to a triumphant return in 1998, 2000, and again in 2002.

His touring engagements at the head of the RPO frequently take him to Germany, Italy, Spain, Belgium, Mexico and the USA. In their first recording for **harmonia mundi usa**, Maestro Gatti led the RPO in a visionary performance of Tchaikovsky's Symphony No. 5; the collaboration continued with their acclaimed recording of Symphony No. 4.

## Royal Philharmonic Orchestra

The history of the Royal Philharmonic Orchestra is inextricably linked to its founder, Sir Thomas Beecham, one of Britain's greatest conductors and classical music's more colourful figures. When in 1946 Beecham set out to create a world-class ensemble from the finest players in the country, he envisioned an orchestra that would bring the greatest music ever composed to every corner of the United Kingdom. Since Sir Thomas' death in 1961, the Orchestra's musical direction and development has been guided by a series of distinguished maestros including Rudolf Kempe, Antal Dorati, André Previn and Vladimir Ashkenazy. Today, under the inspired leadership and gifted musicianship of Daniele Gatti (Music Director since 1996), the Orchestra continues to expand its international reputation while maintaining a deep commitment to its self-appointed role as Britain's national orchestra.

The RPO's performances and recordings have been widely acclaimed by the public and press around the world, who have praised the Orchestra for the "quality of its playing, which [is] incisive, insightful and extremely beautiful" (*The Guardian*, UK).

Over the years, the RPO has enjoyed long-standing partnerships with contemporary and living composers, and has also worked closely with many of the finest film composers of our time. The Orchestra is highly regarded for the versatility of its projects. These range from performing new works by Sir Peter Maxwell Davies at a Royal Gala concert at the Palace of Westminster in commemoration of the end of World War II, to playing at the London premières of the recent *Star Wars*® films.

An orchestra of world renown, the RPO has played for the late Pope John Paul II at the Vatican, the President of China in Tiananmen Square and at the tenth-anniversary celebration of Kazakhstan's independence. The Orchestra was privileged to be invited to record the music for the opening ceremony of the 2004 Olympic Games in Athens. In addition to its regular engagements throughout Europe, the RPO's future plans include tours of the USA, Mexico and China.

For further information about future RPO concerts and recordings, please visit [www.rpo.co.uk](http://www.rpo.co.uk)

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