

**SYMPHONY NO. 5 IN E MINOR, OP. 64**

By PETER ILYICH TCHAIKOVSKY

Born May 7, 1840, in Votkinsk;  
died November 6, 1893, in St. Petersburg

In April of 1888, Tchaikovsky returned to Russia following a long European concert tour and settled into his recently acquired country house at Frolovskoye. The new surroundings provided the composer a welcome and much-needed change of pace, and he spent most of his time putting in his garden and taking long walks in the nearby woods. Within a few weeks, he was able to report to his brother Modest that he had “fallen in love” with his new house, and that it was a “paradise.” In that same letter, though, he also confessed that musical inspiration seemed to be eluding him. “To speak frankly,” he wrote, “I feel as yet no impulse for creative work. What does it mean? Have I written myself out?” These same self-doubts he also relayed in a letter a few days later to Madame Nadezhda von Meck, his wealthy patroness and confidante-by-mail. “I am dreadfully anxious,” he told her, “to prove, not only to others but to myself, that I am not a ‘played-out’ composer. Have I told you that I intend to write a symphony? The beginning was difficult; however, inspiration seems to have come. We shall see.”

Inspiration did indeed come, and Tchaikovsky worked on his new symphony, which was to be his Fifth, throughout the summer. When he completed the score near the end of August, he proudly announced, “I have not blundered; it has turned out well.” The critics and public felt differently, however. When the new symphony was premiered under the composer's baton in St. Petersburg on November 17 and repeated there on November 24, it failed to create a favorable impression either time. A subsequent performance in Prague was equally dismal. Tchaikovsky's old self-doubts quickly returned. “I have come to the conclusion that it is a failure,” he wrote to Madame von Meck. “There is something repellent, something superfluous, patchy, and insincere, which the public instinctively recognizes.”

### NCS/20030919-3 (Tchaikovsky)

It was not until March of the following year, when the symphony was performed in Hamburg, that public opinion changed and Tchaikovsky was able to regain his self-confidence. The rehearsals went well (Tchaikovsky, never a convincing conductor, even of his own music, wisely stayed off the podium this time). The symphony met with overwhelming enthusiasm. “I like it far better now,” the composer grudgingly admitted.

Tchaikovsky essentially patterned his Fifth Symphony after the same “victory through struggle” theme that Beethoven had used for his Fifth Symphony. There is a similar progression from darkness to light, from minor to major. Although Tchaikovsky never provided a specific program for this symphony, it is generally thought that it is concerned with the power of fate and one’s acceptance of it.

The symphony opens with a slow introduction marked *Andante* in which the clarinets, in their low, dark, hollow-sounding *chalmereau* register, intone a somber, foreboding melody—Tchaikovsky’s musical personification of the power of Fate. This theme plays a vital role in the symphony and contributes a cyclic unity to it. It will reappear in each of the succeeding three movements in various guises, emerging at intervals until its apotheosis in the final pages of the score. The main section of the movement, *Allegro con anima*, begins with an infectious, lilting theme played by the clarinet and bassoon. A bridge passage leads to the second subject, a yearning, expressive theme in the strings. In the development, the excitement mounts to a dramatic climax with the brasses pitted against the rest of the orchestra. After the recapitulation, the movement ebbs to a halt as the low strings sink softly into a Tchaikovskyan gloom.

The second movement, *Andante cantabile con alcuna licenza*, opens with eight measures of soft, deep, string harmonies after which the solo horn enters, singing one of Tchaikovsky’s most glorious and soaring love themes. The clarinet adds some comments, and then the oboe introduces a new melody. The music surges to two majestic climaxes. Twice, this impassioned starlit reverie is interrupted by shattering fortissimo intrusions of the “fate” theme before it softly fades into silence.

**NCS/20030919-3 (Tchaikovsky)**

For the third movement, *Valse: Allegro moderato*, Tchaikovsky replaces the traditional scherzo with a waltz. Though certainly lilting, this dance is somewhat wistful, and a gentle melancholy lies not far beneath its surface. In the contrasting middle section, skittering string and woodwind figurations impart a feeling of restlessness and uneasiness. Shortly before the movement ends, the “fate” theme, softly recalled by the clarinets and bassoons, returns like an unhappy memory.

Like the first movement, the finale begins with a slow introduction, this one marked *Andante maestoso*. It, too, is based upon the “fate” theme; however, it now has been transposed from minor to major key and it is clothed with the warm sound of the strings. Its foreboding character has vanished; now, it radiates confidence and optimism. A *crescendo* timpani roll ushers in the powerful, almost barbaric main section of the movement. Marked *Allegro vivace*, it is a blaze of exciting orchestral power that is perhaps unsurpassed in any other Tchaikovsky score. A piercing, repeated trumpet figure leads to a deceptively terminal-sounding general pause, after which the “fate” theme returns, this time even more majestic and triumphant. An exciting *Presto* coda brings the symphony to a thunderous conclusion.

20030515 (896 words)

-Kenneth C. Viant