

## About the Music

by Andy & Beth Buelow

### Igor Stravinsky

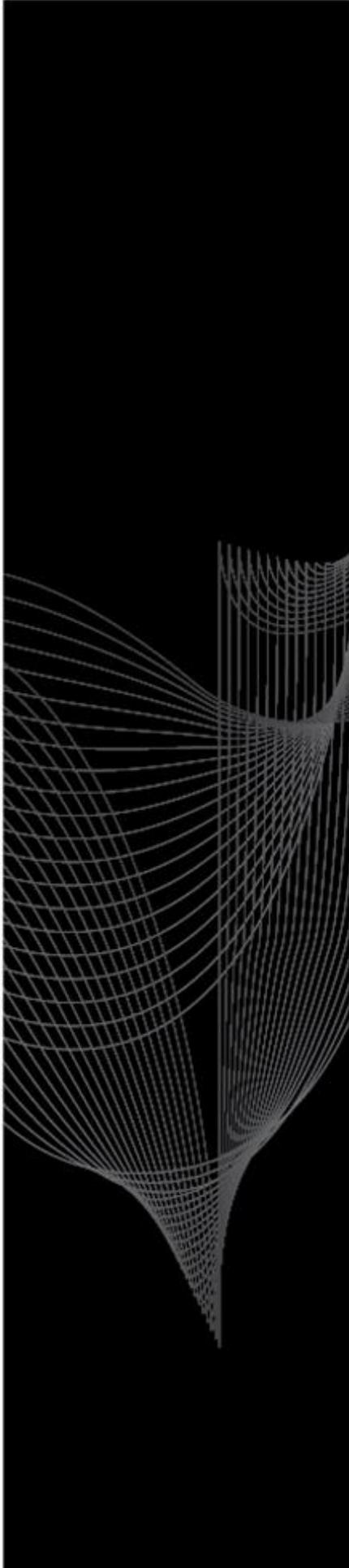
***The Firebird*** (1919 suite from the 1910 ballet)

The genesis of *The Firebird*, which ultimately launched the illustrious career of Igor Stravinsky, involved a bit of luck for the obscure young composer from Russia. He was called by the great impresario Sergei Diaghilev, of the famous Ballet Russe, to compose the music just a few months before its scheduled premiere. Stravinsky's music had made an indelible impression on Diaghilev several years earlier. *The Firebird* score had previously been a project of the Russian composer Liadov, but his procrastination led Diaghilev to withdraw the commission from him, and instead offer it to the relatively unknown Stravinsky. The project represented the 27-year-old composer's first opportunity to pen a major full-length work.

Stravinsky was not completely surprised by Diaghilev's request: "I had begun to think about *The Firebird*... in the fall of 1909, though I was not yet certain of the commission (which in fact did not come until December, more than a month after I had begun to compose; I remember the day Diaghilev telephoned me to say go ahead, and I recall his surprise when I said that I had already started). Early in November I moved from St. Petersburg to a *dacha* belonging to the Rimsky-Korsakov family... I went there for a vacation in birch forests and snow-fresh air, but instead began to work on *The Firebird*. Andrei Rimsky-Korsakov [son of the composer] was with me at the time, as he often was during the following months; because of this, *The Firebird* is dedicated to him."

Completed in St. Petersburg in March 1910, *The Firebird* was premiered by Diaghilev's Ballet Russe in Paris on June 25, 1910. It was the beginning of a long relationship between three of Russia's greatest artists—Diaghilev, Stravinsky and the brilliant dancer Nijinsky—and was considered one of the most extraordinary collaborations in ballet history. In addition to *The Firebird*, the association resulted in the famous ballet *Petrushka* and the controversial *Rite of Spring*, which caused a riot at its premiere and left an indelible mark on 20<sup>th</sup> century music.

Taking a page from his teacher and mentor Rimsky-Korsakov, Stravinsky used colorful orchestration to tell the story of the Firebird. His melodic choices differentiate between the earth-bound and supernatural characters. The music for humans—Prince, Princesses and characters in the finale—is all basically diatonic (within the traditional scale system), including the



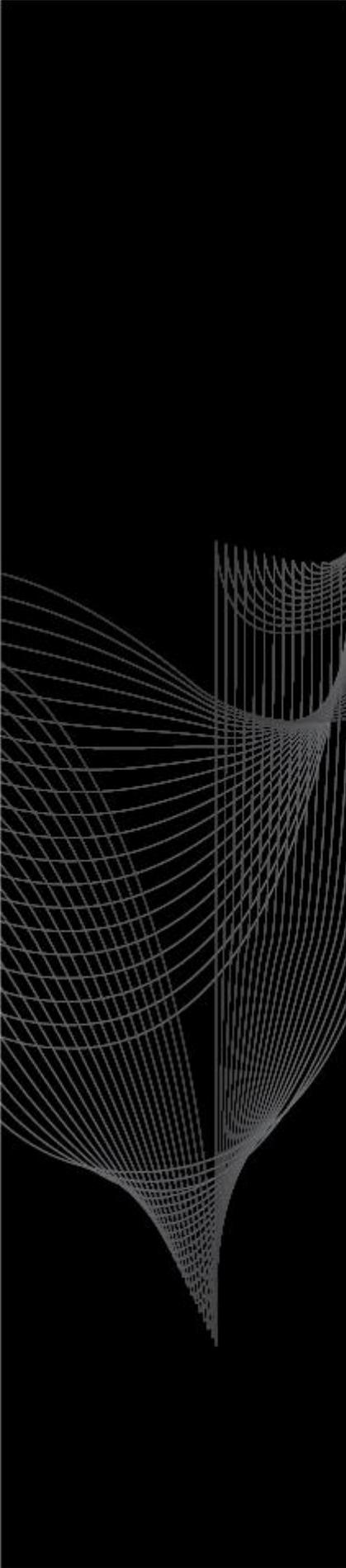
Russian folk melodies Stravinsky incorporated. The supernatural characters—Kastchei and the Firebird—are depicted by chromatic music (colored by notes outside the basic scale), based on the interval of a tritone.

"I was more proud of some of the orchestration than of the music itself," Stravinsky later said. His orchestration contains many brilliant effects, including horn and trombone glissandos (sliding between pitches) and the natural-harmonic string glissando near the beginning, which the bass chord touches off like a Catherine-wheel [revolving firework]. "I was delighted to have discovered this, and I remember my excitement in demonstrating it to Rimsky's violinist and cellist sons. I remember, too, Richard Strauss's astonishment when he heard it two years later in Berlin."

The Firebird illustrates a popular Russian folk tale, summarized as follows:

(Introduction) The czar's son, Prince Ivan, has an unexpected meeting with "a fabulous bird with plumage of fire" during a hunting excursion. In exchange for not being hunted down by Ivan, the fabulous Firebird bargains her freedom by giving Ivan a magic feather (The Firebird and Her Dance). Later, Ivan chances upon an enchanted castle with a courtyard full of lovely maidens (Round Dance of the Princesses). They warn Ivan of the evil Kastchei in the castle who, for his own amusement, turns travelers into stone. Ivan, undaunted, enters the castle, and is faced by the evil Kastchei. The magic feather shields him from harm, and the Firebird appears, sending Kastchei and his ogres into a mad dance (Infernal Dance of King Kastchei). The evil ones are left exhausted and eventually destroyed by the Firebird (Berceuse). Kastchei's victims are freed from their stone spells, and Ivan wins the hand of a lovely Princess (Finale).

While it proved wildly popular with audiences, Stravinsky was particularly critical of his composition, feeling it was melodically unimaginative and utilized a "wastefully large" orchestra (something with which few symphony executive directors would disagree!). However, Stravinsky conducted the work nearly a thousand times during his career, including on his last recording as a conductor. Probably to his chagrin, he recalled, "To complete the picture, I was once addressed by a man in an American railway dining car, and quite seriously, as 'Mr. Fireberg.'"



**Maurice Ravel (1875-1937)**  
**Piano Concerto in G Major (1931)**

Some composers are as familiar for their maladies as for their music: Beethoven's famous deafness, Bach's increasing blindness, and the challenges presented by mental illness for Tchaikovsky, Schumann and Gershwin. The decline of Maurice Ravel was one of the most tragic of all stories. Ravel's brain disease left him lucid yet helpless, unable to write, speak, or play an instrument, full of ideas yet with no way to communicate them.

The years preceding his illness were, however, prolific and creative. He set out in 1929, after having achieved some security through the success of *Bolero* and an American concert tour, to begin composing a piano concerto to showcase his enormous talents. Sketches for the work were started as early as 1911, but it was the jazz influences from his American tour that inspired him to complete the concerto.

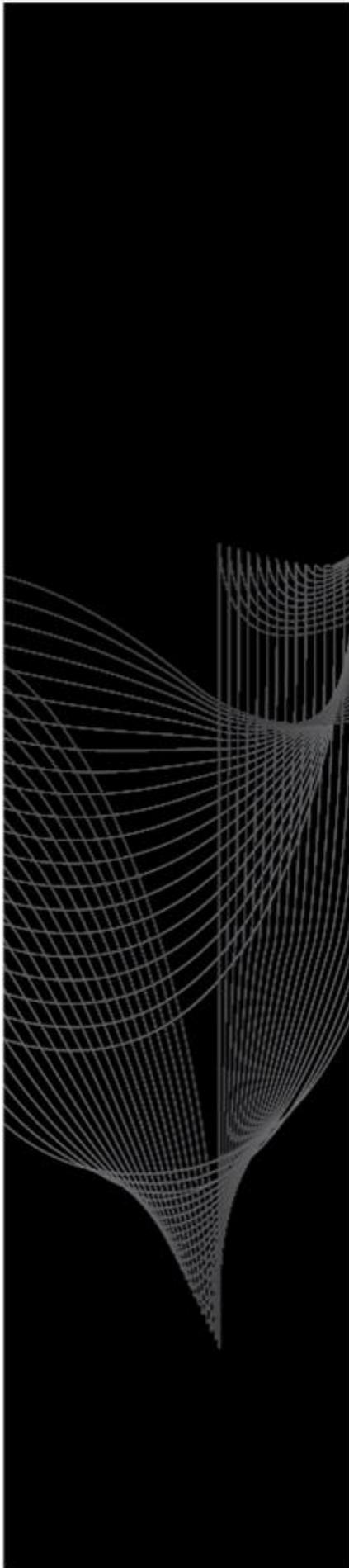
He practiced madly for the premiere, devoting hours each day to etudes of Chopin and Liszt. His preparations were only interrupted briefly to attend a festival in his honor. He wrote to friends about the inconvenience: "In the midst of my pregnancy with the concerto (I am at the stage of throwing up) I am suddenly called to Biarritz. You must have seen the billboards designed by Fugita [a famous Japanese painter] announcing 'Le grand festival de Maurice Ravel.' Two hundred francs for a ticket! It's lucky that I can get in 'on the house.'"

When Ravel finally completed the concerto, he found the work beyond his talents as a pianist. He decided to pass along the premiere privileges to his protégé Marguerite Long.

With a sharp crack of a whip, the concerto begins. The piccolo and clarinet introduce a quick, nimble line that yields to a rush of brass and piano. The mood shifts to a jazzy, more introspective piano statement that is developed against blues notes in the winds. In a debt to classical tradition, Ravel allows a brief development and recapitulation of the main themes before a flashy cadenza propels the movement to its close. The second movement opens with a beautifully haunting piano solo. The intimacy and gentleness of the movement is only contradicted by a slight rhythmic tug-of-war; the tension comes from the right hand melody being in 3/4, the left in 6/8. The concerto concludes with a lightning fast, jazzy rondo, providing ample opportunity for virtuosity and flashes of brash brilliance from both soloist and orchestra.

**Peter Ilyich Tchaikovsky (1840-1893)**  
**Symphony No. 4 in F minor, Op. 36 (1878)**

The composing of Symphony No. 4 spanned a turbulent period of Tchaikovsky's life that ended up being something of a turning point. Interestingly, the sequence of events roughly corresponds to the elements of Sonata-Allegro Form: angst (occasioned by his brief and ill-fated marriage) followed by emotional convalescence, resolution and recovery. Artistically, it marked a final transition from a classical to Romantic aesthetic in his symphonic writing.



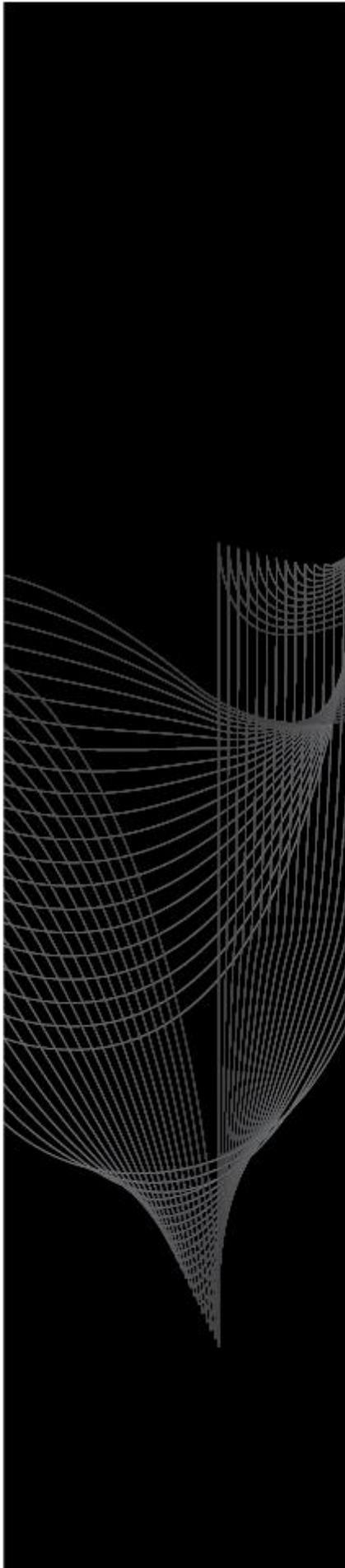
Two women played prominent roles in this episode of his life. First, there was Antonina Miliukova: former student and, briefly, wife. Although successive Russian governments have long attempted to suppress the fact, Tchaikovsky was avowedly gay and this was an open secret throughout his adult life. The marriage—an attempt at conventionality embarked upon after a long and persistent pursuit by Miliukova—was doomed from the start and broke up after only a few months—leaving the fragile composer emotionally shattered.

It was some months before he was able to resume work on the symphony, begun prior to his marriage. Ultimately, the episode resulted in a measure of—not quite self-acceptance, but at least self-possession. A slightly more composed resignation to his fate was, for Tchaikovsky, mental health! But even this was some time in coming.

The second notable woman was his patroness, Russian businesswoman Nadezhda von Meck, who supported him financially for 13 years but whom he never met. Such artistic patronages, customary in 19<sup>th</sup>-century Russian society, were a partnership of equals—in sharp contrast to that of 18<sup>th</sup>-century Western Europe, where a Mozart or Haydn was little more than the paid serf of a duke, count or emperor. With Tchaikovsky and von Meck, it was more than a partnership: she became his close friend and confidant, and his writings to her provide intimate insights into the composer's emotional life.

The transition from Classical to Romantic sensibility—in Tchaikovsky and, more generally, in Western music as a whole—was a shift from objective to subjective, from abstract architecture (Richard Wagner termed it “absolute music”) to descriptive storyline. A Mozart or Haydn symphony, even if it includes a subtitle, is not “about” anything. With Beethoven, however, this began to change. In his 1804 3<sup>rd</sup> Symphony, the “Eroica,” and especially his 5<sup>th</sup> of 1808, there is an emerging sense of an extra-musical driving force—though an overt “program” or narrative is still lacking. The classic example of the latter arrives with Hector Berlioz's *Symphonie Fantastique* of 1830, which follows a twisted plot detailed explicitly by the composer in accompanying notes.

But the Romantic transition was not merely from abstract to pictorial, but from public to personal. There is an emotional detachment and universality in Mozart that shifts to something highly individual in Beethoven and his successors. Mozart is not trying to express his innermost thoughts, he is simply writing good music. Beethoven may have started out this way with his Symphonies nos. 1 and 2, but by the 5<sup>th</sup> and, especially, the 9<sup>th</sup>, he is going for the grand pronouncement.



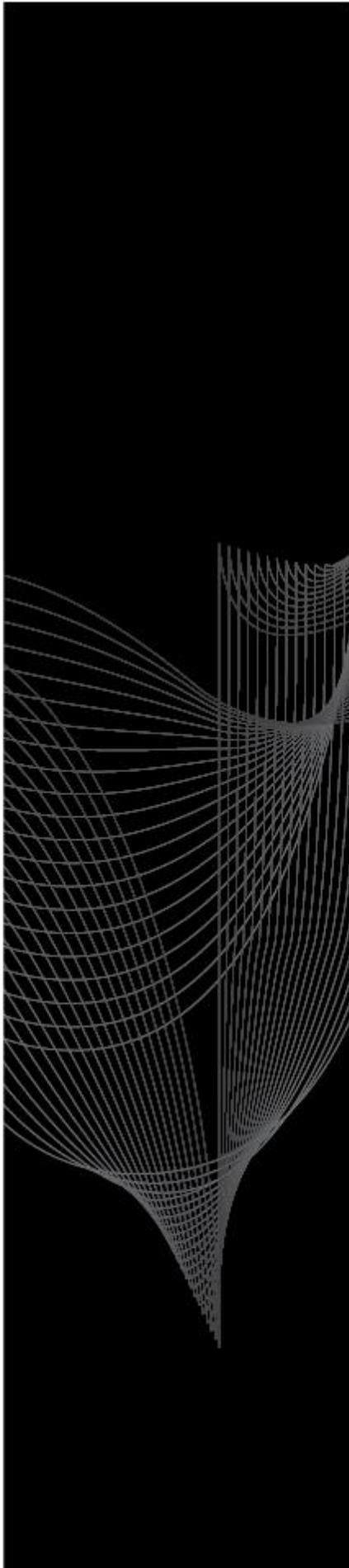
As for Tchaikovsky—belonging to the subsequent, mid-century generation—there is usually a sense of both the evocative and the biographical about him, even when he is trying to adhere to classical form. And while there is an element of restraint and observance of tradition in his early symphonies, the unfolding events of his personal life made this increasingly impossible, and by the 4<sup>th</sup> he is ready to throw all reticence to the wind and write in a highly personal, powerful and cathartic vein.

Although he publicly downplayed the programmatic extent of the 4<sup>th</sup>, it is often referred to as the “Fatum” or “Fate” Symphony. Tchaikovsky himself said that the opening fanfare of the first movement stood for “the fatal power which prevents one from attaining the goal of happiness.” The fanfare, centered around only three notes, reflects the two-note main motif of Beethoven’s 5<sup>th</sup> Symphony, which it rhythmically recalls. Tchaikovsky uses it in a similar manner, as a unifying element that recurs throughout the symphony.

Yet, although he may have had this earlier work in his mind, Tchaikovsky was too bursting with suppressed emotion to contain his writing in such an essentially classical manner, and the symphony proceeds in a fashion that is more rhapsodic and balletic than symphonic. Even his fellow composer Sergei Taneyev felt that, the “fate” motif notwithstanding, it was more like a suite of ballet music than a symphony—an observation which Tchaikovsky did not particularly appreciate!

In the opening movement, the motif rather quickly subsides to a dreamy, lilting, waltz-like main theme, though it returns later on to remind us what a serious business life is. Musicologist Philip Huscher unabashedly refers to the second movement as a *pas de deux* (a dance form in classical ballet). The playful and mischievous scherzo movement, one of the most prolonged and brilliant passages of pizzicato writing in the repertoire, also sounds as if it is taken straight from a ballet score.

Following the basic form of Beethoven’s 5<sup>th</sup>, the finale seems to be one of ultimate triumph—but unlike Beethoven, Tchaikovsky’s triumph is not personal, nor does it have the final word. As he wrote to von Meck, “Hardly have you managed to forget yourself and to be carried away by the spectacle of the joys of others, than irrepressible *fate* appears again and reminds you of yourself. But others do not care about you, and they have not noticed that you are solitary and sad. O, how they are enjoying themselves!” The final happiness of this symphony is not for Tchaikovsky himself, but for others. How nice for them, he seems to wryly and wistfully observe—and the symphony ends on a note of bombast, almost like a parody of gaiety.



Initial response to the work was unfavorable (of course). A German reviewer complained, "The composer's twaddle disturbed my mood. The confusion in brass and the abuse of the kettledrums drove me away!" Reaction stateside was also mixed. The *New York Post* wrote, "The Fourth Tchaikovsky Symphony proved to be one of the most thoroughly Russian, i.e. semi-barbaric, compositions ever heard in the city. ... If Tchaikovsky had called his symphony 'A Sleigh Ride Through Siberia' no one would have found this title inappropriate."

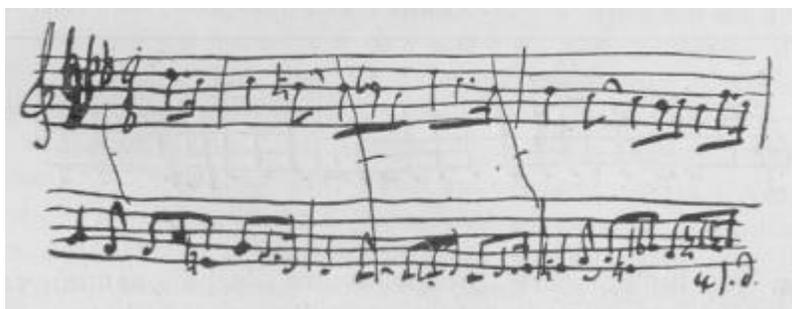
In a letter to von Meck, Tchaikovsky outlined the program in detail:

You asked me whether there is a definite programme to this symphony? Usually when this question is put to me about a symphonic work my answer is: *none!* Indeed, this is a difficult question to answer. How can one put into words the intangible sensations which one experiences when writing an instrumental work without a specific subject? This is a purely lyrical process. This is, fundamentally, an unburdening of the soul in music, with its essence distilled into sounds, in the same manner in which a lyrical poet expresses himself in verse. The only difference is that music has much more powerful means and a more subtle language with which to express thousands of different emotions and frames of mind. [...] In *our* symphony there *is* a programme, i.e. it is possible to express in words what it is trying to say, and to you, and only to you, I am able and willing to explain the meaning both of the whole and of the separate movements. Of course, I can do this only in general terms.

The introduction is the *seed* of the whole symphony, undoubtedly the main idea:



This is *Fate*: this is that fateful force which prevents the impulse to happiness from attaining its goal, which jealously ensures that peace and happiness shall not be complete and unclouded, which hangs above the head like the sword of Damocles, unwaveringly, constantly poisoning the soul. It is an invincible force that can never be overcome—merely endured, hopelessly.



The bleak and hopeless feelings grow stronger and intense. Is it not better to escape from reality and to immerse oneself in dreams:

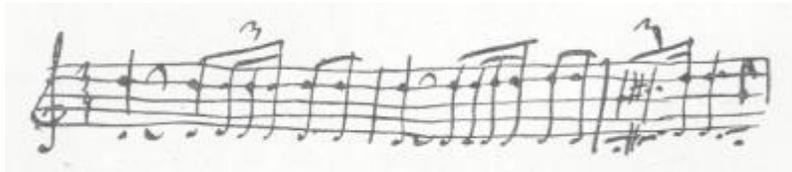


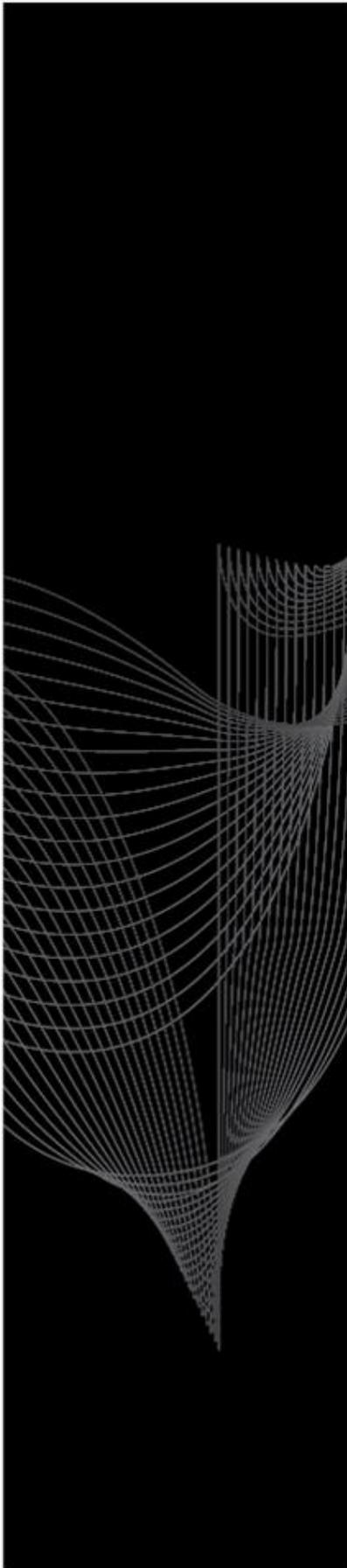
Oh joy! Out of nowhere a sweet and gentle day-dream appears. Some blissful, radiant human image hurries by and beckons us away:



How wonderful! How distant the obsessive first theme of the allegro now sounds! Gradually the soul is enveloped by daydreams. Everything gloomy and joyless is forgotten. Here it is, here it is—happiness!

No! These were daydreams, and *Fate* wakes us from them:





And thus all life is an unbroken alternation of harsh reality with fleeting dreams and visions of happiness... No haven exists... Drift upon that sea until it engulfs and submerges you in its depths. That, roughly, is the programme of the first movement.

The second movement of the symphony expresses another aspect of sadness. This is that melancholy feeling which comes in the evening when, weary from one's toil, one sits alone with a book—but it falls from the hand. There come a whole host of memories. It is sad that so much is now *in the past*, albeit pleasant to recall one's youth. Both regretting the past, and yet not wishing to begin life over again. Life is wearisome. It is pleasant to rest and look around. Memories abound! Happy moments when the young blood boiled, and life was satisfying. There are also painful memories, irreconcilable losses. All this is now somewhere far distant. It is both sad, yet somehow sweet to be immersed in the past...

The third movement expresses no specific feeling. This is whimsical arabesques, vague images which can sweep past the imagination after drinking a little wine and feeling the first phases of intoxication. The spirit is neither cheerful, nor sad. Thinking about nothing in particular, giving free rein to the imagination, which somehow begins to paint strange pictures... Amid these memories there suddenly comes a picture of drunken peasants and a street song... Then, somewhere in the distance, a military procession passes. These are completely incoherent images which sweep through the head as one falls asleep. They have nothing in common with reality; they are strange, wild, and incoherent...

The fourth movement. If within yourself you find no reasons for joy, then look at others. Go out among the people. See how they can enjoy themselves, surrendering themselves wholeheartedly to joyful feelings. Picture the festive merriment of ordinary people. Hardly have you managed to forget yourself and to be carried away by the spectacle of the joys of others, than irrepressible *fate* appears again and reminds you of yourself. But others do not care about you, and they have not noticed that you are solitary and sad. O, how they are enjoying themselves! How happy they are that all their feelings are simple and straightforward. Reproach yourself, and do not say that everything in this world is sad. Joy is a simple but powerful force. Rejoice in the rejoicing of others. To live is still possible.

