

# PIOTR ILYICH TCHAIKOVSKY

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

## Symphony No. 1 in G minor, Opus 13, "Winter Dreams" (1866; revised in 1874)

PREMIERE OF WORK: Moscow, February 15, 1868

Orchestra of the Russian Music Society

Nikolai Rubinstein, conductor

APPROXIMATE DURATION: 43 minutes

INSTRUMENTATION: piccolo, three flutes, two oboes, two clarinets, two bassoons, four horns, two trumpets, three trombones, tuba, timpani, percussion and strings

In 1859, Anton Rubinstein established the Russian Musical Society in St. Petersburg; a year later his brother Nikolai opened the Society's branch in Moscow. Since one of the important aims of the Society was to encourage musical education in Russia, it instituted classes almost immediately in both cities. St. Petersburg was first to receive an imperial charter to open a conservatory and offer a formal curriculum of instruction, and Tchaikovsky, who had quit his job as a clerk in the Ministry of Justice to devote himself to music, was in the first class of students when the school was officially opened in 1862. By January 1866, he had completed his studies in theory and composition, principally with Rubinstein and Nikolai Zarembo, and was in need of a job. On the basis of his academic work, which included a cantata for the graduation examinations courageously based on the same *Ode to Joy* text by Schiller that Beethoven had set in his Ninth Symphony, Rubinstein recommended Tchaikovsky to Nikolai as a teacher for the music classes in Moscow. The official opening of the Moscow Conservatory was still some months off, so Nikolai was running the program from his own home and was able to pay his instructors only a pittance. Though reluctant to leave the rich cultural milieu of St. Petersburg for more provincial Moscow, Tchaikovsky accepted the much-needed position.

As soon as his St. Petersburg studies were completed in mid-January, Tchaikovsky departed for Moscow, where he was greeted at the train station like an old friend by Nikolai Rubinstein. Nikolai immediately took the young musician under his wing, lending him clothes (including a frock coat left behind by famed violinist-composer Henryk Wieniawski on a recent visit), introducing him to his wide circle of acquaintances, offering him a room in his home, and lavishing upon him every hospitality. (Rubinstein also included Tchaikovsky in his nightly rounds of tavern-hopping, during which each impressed the other with his capacity for alcohol.) Nikolai encouraged Tchaikovsky to supplement his teaching duties by continuing his creative work, and the first project he suggested was a revision for full orchestra of the *Overture in F major* written at the end of the preceding year. Tchaikovsky had conducted the original chamber orchestra version of the work as a student in December, shortly before he left the St. Petersburg Conservatory. The success of the revised version when it was conducted in Moscow by Nikolai on March 4th (the first public performance of one of Tchaikovsky's compositions) was such that he was motivated to begin writing a symphony that same month. Though working on such a large scale was a daunting challenge for the young composer, the new symphony was completed by November, and premiered by Nikolai in Moscow on February 15, 1868 "with great success," reported the composer to his brother Anatoli. The work was inscribed "Winter Dreams." The first two movements were called "Reveries of a Winter Journey" and "Land of Desolation, Land of Mists"; the closing movements are without sobriquet. There is no specific program apparent in the music, though Tchaikovsky may have intended that this be his contribution to the many depictions of the harsh Russian winters that have always been popular subjects in that country's literature and art.

The Symphony's first movement opens as the flute and bassoon present the doleful main theme above the murmurings of the violins. The complementary melody, more lyrical in phrasing and brighter in mood, is sung initially by the clarinet. The development section, typically Tchaikovskian in many of its orchestral techniques, combines true motivic elaboration with a certain amount of boisterous, newly invented figuration. The recapitulation returns the themes of the beginning and ends with the hushed whispers of the first measures.

A chorale-like passage for strings opens and closes the second movement. Within this frame are set two folkish melodies: the first, a plaintive tune, intoned by the oboe, has hints of the *Volga Boatmen*; the other is a more flowing song given first by the flutes and violas. The nimble *Scherzo*, indebted to Mendelssohn for its effervescent writing, is based on a movement from Tchaikovsky's Piano Sonata in C-sharp minor, composed in 1865; the lovely central trio is the first of the succession of great waltzes Tchaikovsky penned for orchestra. The finale is a gloriously noisy display of orchestral color and rhythmic

energy. It begins with a slow introduction (“lugubrious,” notes the score) during which the violins present the Russian folk song *The Gardens Bloomed*. A vivacious main theme in fast tempo is hurled forth by the full orchestra before the folk song returns to serve as the second theme. Twice the tempo is increased in the closing pages so that the ending of the Symphony is filled with brilliant whirling vitality and bursting high spirits.

— Dr. Richard E. Rodda