

Thoughts on Tchaikovsky's Symphony No. 5 Manfred Honeck

There is hardly another composer so stuck with the cliché of being sentimental or noisy as Tchaikovsky. Not that it would be necessary to deny the sentiment or the triumphant fortissimi in his music – for me, the secret is not to enhance these traits as they have already been "composed into" the music (as Gustav Mahler might have said). Otherwise sentiment will become insufferable mawkishness, and a triumphant march turns into nothing but hysterical racket. Treated with the respect it deserves, this symphony is one of the most profound of its time.

In his notebook, Tchaikovsky hinted at a program for the Fifth Symphony. The question of whether or not Tchaikovsky oriented himself towards Beethoven's Fifth Symphony (known as "Fate") might be interesting but, in the end, is not of vital importance here. Rather, it is essential to watch the tiniest details of the varying moods and let every musical phrase become part of the whole story.

It is necessary to bring out the undertones of the introduction of the first movement, shaped as "complete resignation before fate" (Tchaikovsky), the lightness and exuberance of the dances and the doubts and longings as well as the inexorability of the coda, which, for me, constitutes a death march into the deepest abyss. Here, to my mind, the celli and basses have to play with the utmost vehemence, before the movement fades away softly, virtually disappearing into darkness.

Significantly, Tchaikovsky lets the melody of the second movement rise again from this darkness, a movement where he confronts himself with the question: "Shall I throw myself into the embraces of Faith?" A gentle tune, referred to as "a ray of light" by the composer, full of sincerely felt beauty, colors and notions, is interrupted abruptly by the fate theme twice. Especially after the second interruption, marked by Tchaikovsky with accents on every note, thus increasing the implacability of fate into an excess, the music has to halt. It is impossible to carry on as if nothing had happened. Towards the end, a wistful lament and a quiet farewell song, last in the clarinets, make for a *kind of rapture*.

The third movement, a Russian waltz, serves as transition, and is not only of technical brilliance but also rich in manifold ideas and sounds (such as muted horns).

The fourth movement fascinates me because of its elaborate processing of typical Russian melodies. It draws deeply from the abundance of Russian folk music; it is a unique celebration of Russian folklore. It is understandable that Johannes Brahms, who met Tchaikovsky in Hamburg at a rehearsal, dismissed it, as it lacks the necessary (for Brahms) melodious cesuras. The first theme could actually have been performed by a balalaika orchestra; it is like a quick polka. The fate theme reappears as a march. It is important to me however, that this not be performed as a military triumph march, but as a melodious hymn, a personal triumph. Out of the deepest abyss he achieves a victory of the soul.