

Like so many Russian musicians, Mravinsky seemed first headed toward a career in the sciences. He studied biology at St. Petersburg University, but had to quit in 1920 after his father's death. To support himself, he signed on with the Imperial Ballet as a rehearsal pianist. In 1923, he finally enrolled in the Leningrad Conservatory, where he studied composition with Vladimir Shcherbachov and conducting with Alexander Gauk and Nikolai Malko. He graduated in 1931, and left his Imperial Ballet job to become a musical assistant and ballet conductor at the Bolshoi Opera from 1931 to 1937, with a stint at the Kirov from 1934. Mravinsky gave up these posts in 1938, after winning first prize in the All-Union Conductors' Competition in Moscow, to become principal conductor of the Leningrad Philharmonic. He remained there until his death, long ignoring many guest-conducting offers from abroad. Under Mravinsky's direction the Leningrad Philharmonic came to be regarded as one of the finest orchestras in the world, although the world had comparatively few opportunities to hear it aside from the rare tour (about 30 performances in 25 years, starting in 1956), some dim Soviet recordings, and a very few highly acclaimed records for such Western European companies as Deutsche Grammophon and, in the end, Erato. Mravinsky was made People's Artist of the U.S.S.R. in 1954, and in 1973, he received the order of Hero of Socialist Labor. But his more lasting international acclaim came for his performances of Mozart, Beethoven, Bruckner, Wagner, Sibelius, Bartók, Stravinsky, and anything Russian or Soviet. His reputation only rose upon his retirement from the Leningrad Philharmonic.



Mravinsky's rehearsal manner was said to be autocratic and brutal, and the resulting performances were tightly clenched. Yet they were also technically precise, finely detailed, subtly colored, and highly dramatic -- and this not always because he was in the habit of whipping fast finales into a frenzy. His readings had an intensity, concentration, and -- despite the arduous rehearsal -- spontaneity comparable to those of Wilhelm Furtwängler. In the West, Mravinsky was particularly noted as an interpreter of Shostakovich, whose Fifth, Sixth, Eighth, Ninth, and Tenth symphonies he premiered, and of Tchaikovsky. His recordings of the Tchaikovsky's last three symphonies, made in 1960 for Deutsche Grammophon while the orchestra was on tour in London, are touchstones of the Russian repertory.

Tchaikovsky

Symphony No. 6

Evgeny Mravinsky

Leningrad Philharmonic Orchestra



The Pathétique Symphony is Tchaikovsky's last symphony, and the last piece to be premiered while the composer was still alive.

It was in about 1891 that Tchaikovsky began sketching out his last symphony, in a little country house in the beautiful Russian countryside. He was famous, adored, well-off, and at the peak of his composing powers. But his personal life and emotions were a mess. A lifelong sufferer of anxiety and depression, events over his life had only worsened his state to a sort of anguish.

He was a repressed homosexual in an extremely strict society. His greatest companion over the years, wealthy widow Nadezhda von Meck, had only recently abruptly cut off both her money and her correspondence with him. So, perhaps knowing that his life was going to end soon, he poured his tortured energy into his last symphony, tearing up his sketches repeatedly in displeasure.

But eventually his powerful, immaculate final symphony came into full being. He proudly hailed it as his greatest work, a triumph. His brother Modeste gave it the name "Pathétique" (i.e. emotional and passionate), which Tchaikovsky liked and kept.

At the end of October 1893 he traveled to Saint Petersburg to conduct the premiere. The symphony's innovations and profound grief struck the audience, who listened stunned. Critics flared up, but the public loved it. Nine days after the premiere, Tchaikovsky died in torment from cholera. Earlier he drank unboiled water, which was strange considering he was an intelligent and successful man.

Was it an accident? Was it a desperate act in a fit of despair? Or was it, like one theory says, a death order from a group of Tchaikovsky's former schoolmates, who were scared of a homosexual scandal? Whatever it was (and we'll probably never know for certain), the composer's death adds an extra dimension of mystery and awe to the Pathétique Symphony.

Another piece which Tchaikovsky wrote soon before he died was the Nutcracker ballet, a charming, honeyed fairytale story – very different from the lavish pain of the 6th Symphony!

The music in the Tchaikovsky Symphony 6 is typical of the composer's style. It has stunningly vivid orchestra colors, sophisticated academic colors, brilliant climaxes, and delicious melodies which appeal to everyone. But there's an undercurrent of hopelessness and despair in this piece. The

symphony's gloom is almost like a suicide note, reflecting the sense of doom Tchaikovsky might have felt.

Even movements which sound happy and triumphant, such as the third movement, have a jittery edge which almost sounds desperate.

There are four movements in the Tchaikovsky Symphony 6:

Adagio – Allegro non troppo: This brooding first movement has a classical style structure. It starts from dark depths and rises slowly to beautiful, sweeping melody, full of grace but also comfortably simple.

It develops before settling on an extremely quiet bassoon note. The first movement could almost be over, but instead it's shattered by a dramatic thunderbolt of orchestral sound, surrounded by a swirling fury. This continues until the movement ends with the first quiet theme.

Allegro con grazia: A very unique "limping" waltz, since it's in 5/4 time (instead of the normal 3/4). The bizarre rhythm gives a sense of nervousness and slight distress, but the melodies are still smooth and attractive.

Allegro Molto Vivace: In this fast-paced, explosive piece, Tchaikovsky builds up the tension for the first half gradually layering on brass on strings until a powerfully exultant climax erupts:

But the movement has some slightly unusual touches, such as the loud climax being played by the strings instead of brass. I get the feeling that the triumphant blaring is perhaps a mask for edginess and agitation.

Adagio Lamentoso: The slowest movement comes last. In this bleak, painfully anguished movement, Tchaikovsky lays his soul bare and meditates on death.

The music becomes a dark, boiling mass. It ends on the rough deep strings, the last of his own orchestral music Tchaikovsky himself heard.

Tchaikovsky Symphony No. 6

Evgeny Mravinsky conducts the Leningrad Philharmonic Orchestra

- 1. Adagio - Allegro Non Troppo 17:27**
- 2. Allegro Con Grazia 8:00**
- 3. Allegro Molto Vivace 8:17**
- 4. Finale: Adagio Lamentoso 9:39**

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