Fritz Reiner was one of the most acclaimed conductors of the 20th century -- noted for the vast range of his repertoire, which included both symphonic and operatic pieces spanning from the traditional canon to contemporary material, he was also an influential educator who counted among his pupils Leonard Bernstein. Reiner was born in Budapest, Hungary, on December 19, 1888; despite earning a law degree from the University of Bucharest, he pursued a career in music, and at age 21 was named chorusmaster of the Budapest Opera. A stint as conductor with the Budapest Volksoper followed before Reiner was chosen in 1914 to serve as principal conductor of the Royal Opera in Dresden, where he collaborated with Richard Strauss on productions of several of the composer's early operas.

In 1922 Reiner left Europe to relocate to America, settling in Cincinnati, OH, and signing on as conductor with the Cincinnati Symphony Orchestra; a decade later he was tapped to head the orchestral and opera departments at Philadelphia's Curtis Institute of Music, where his students included Bernstein. After next serving as the music director of the Pittsburgh Symphony between 1938 and 1948, he served five years with the Metropolitan Opera. While Reiner's frequent migration might have been attributed largely to a restless creativity, he was also a notoriously difficult personality who frequently alienated those around him -- many of the musicians under his command openly loathed him, although he inevitably inspired the best work of their careers.

Reiner's own best work was undoubtedly his tenure with the Chicago Symphony Orchestra, which he elevated into one of the most celebrated ensembles in the world. Moving over to the CSO in 1953, he not only established the orchestra as a top-flight live attraction but also as a popular recording entity -- the countless albums they made for RCA's Living Stereo series during Reiner's decade-long tenure were much acclaimed by collectors for both the power of the performances and the unusually high fidelity of the recordings themselves. Releases like Fritz Reiner Conducts Richard Strauss and Fritz Reiner Conducts Bartók in particular remain definitive interpretations of the composers in question. Health problems forced Reiner to resign his position in 1962, and he died in New York City on November 15 of the following year.

Tchaikovsky
Symphony No. 6 "Pathétique"
Fritz Reiner / Chicago Symphony Orchestra

Tchaikovsky composed this music between February and August 1893, and conducted the first performance on October 28 of that year in St. Petersburg. Already in 1890 Tchaikovsky had written to his patroness of 13 years, Nadezhda von Meck, about a possible "program symphony." By 1893 he was ready to follow through on the idea, dedicated to his nephew Vladimir Davidov, the "Bobyk" (or "Bob") of many diary-entries and letters during the 1880s. After a successful premiere, however, he was not satisfied with Program Symphony (No. 6) on the title page. Several days later Modest suggested "patetichesky," which in Russian means "1, enthusiastic, passionate; 2, emotional; and 3, bombastic" (rather than "pathetic" or "arousing pity," as in English). Pyotr Il'yich was delighted by the suggestion: "Excellent, Modya, bravo, patetichesky!" He wrote this onto the score, and sent it the same day to his publisher, Jurgenson. Two days later, however, he had qualms and asked Jurgenson to suppress subtitles -- to issue the work simply as Symphony No. 6, dedicated to Bobyk. One week later, he was dead. As for Jurgenson, he could not resist the opportunity in 1893 to publish No. 6, in elegant Lingua Franca, as Symphonie pathétique. The sobriquet has stuck ever since.

During the work's incubation Tchaikovsky was in rare good spirits, pleased with his boldness and fluency, especially in the trailblazing finale, a drawn-out Adagio of funereal character. Where others still wrote conventional slow movements, he hit on the idea of "a limping waltz" in 5/4 time. And he made the scherzo a march that builds to such a pitch of excitement that audiences ever since, everywhere, applaud at the end.

A lugubrious Adagio prologue begins with a bassoon solo in E minor that makes its way upward through the murk of divisi string basses, followed by a nervous little motif that blossoms into the main theme of an Allegro ma non troppo sonata-structure in B minor. The memorably sighing, mauve-hued melody that dominates this movement is actually its secondary subject. A crashing orchestral tutti sets up the passionately agitated development section, followed by a condensed reprise and a brief, calmed coda.

Tchaikovsky's marking for this D major "waltz" movement is Allegro con grazia -- a song and trio with extended coda whose mood may be wistful, even melancholic midway, but whose spirit is balletic, to the extent of echoing Nutcracker's "Waltz of the Flowers," composed a year earlier.

The March-Scherzo, Allegro molto vivace in common time, has an elfin character at the start. It is a sonatina (exposition and reprise without development) that quick-steps to an explosive climax but always returns to tonic G major.

Another sonatina (symphonic developments were Tchaikovsky's bête noire) is anchored in B minor, although the tragic second theme enters in D major. The overall mood is inconsolably grieving, but not "pathetic." Ultimately, the music returns to those murky depths in which the symphony was born some 40 minutes earlier -- without, however, benediction or hope.

Tchaikovsky
Symphony No. 6 "Pathétique"
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1. Adagio; Allegro Non Troppo 18:08

2. Allegro Con Grazia 7:49

3. Allegro Molto Vivace 8:40

4. Finale: Adagop Lamentoso 10:44

Total Time: 45:21

Recorded by RCA April 16 & 17, 1957, at Orchestra Hall, Chicago
Produced by Richard Mohr   Recording Engineer: Lewis Layton
Transferred from a 15ips two track tape

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