Tchaikovsky

CD 1
1 Orchestrion

It wasn't unusual, in the middle of the 19th century, to hear sounds like that coming from the drawing rooms of comfortable, middle-class families. The Orchestrion, one of the first and grandest of mass-produced mechanical music-makers, was one of the precursors of the 20th century gramophone. It brought music into homes where otherwise it might never have been heard, except through the stumbling fingers of children, enduring, or in some cases actually enjoying, their obligatory half-hour of practice time. In most families the Orchestrion was a source of pleasure. But in one Russian household, it seems to have been rather more. It afforded a small boy named Piotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky some of his earliest glimpses into a world, and a language, which was to become (in more senses then one), his lifeline. One evening his French governess, Fanny Dürbach, went into the nursery and found the tiny child sitting up in bed, crying. 'What's the matter?' she asked – and his answer surprised her. 'This music' he wailed, 'this music!' She listened. The house was quiet. 'No. It's here,' cried the boy – he pointed to his head. 'It's here, and I can't make it go away. It won't leave me.' And of course it never did.

> 'His sensitivity knew no bounds and so one had to deal with him very carefully. Every little trifle could upset or wound him. He was a child of glass. As for reproofs and admonitions (with him there could be no question of punishments), what would have been water off a duck's back to other children affected him deeply, and if the degree of severity was increased only the slightest, it would upset him alarmingly.'

Despite his outwardly happy appearance, peace of mind is something Tchaikovsky rarely knew, from childhood to his dying day. No-one knew this better than his doctor and friend Vasily Bertenson.

> 'In his childhood Pyotr Ilyich would very often awake in the middle of the night in hysterical fits. In later years this nervousness manifested itself in insomnia and in phenomena that he called "little fits," that is, a sudden awakening from some sort of jolt, with a sensation of insurmountable terror. These "little fits," at times recurring nearly every night, drove him to a hatred of going to bed that sometimes lasted for months, and during this time, he would fall asleep only in his robe, now sitting in his armchair, now stretched out on the sofa.'

And truth to tell, there was plenty to disturb his mind. When he was eight years old, Tchaikovsky was sent to the fashionable Schmelling School in St. Petersburg. That he ever forgave his parents for this Dickensian act is testament enough to the 'angelic' nature which was remarked on throughout his life. Indeed he seems never to have blamed them in the first place. Which is itself remarkable, since this was a school that made anything described by Dickens look like the proverbial vicarage tea party. Among the tools of discipline was public flogging, carried out in the presence of both junior and

senior students. It was an experience no-one ever forgot. Years later, the eminent critic Vladimir Stasov remembered one such occasion with bitter vividness:

> 'The director shouted and threatened so much that he threw himself into an authoritarian hysteria from which he could not retreat. As a result, he decided to whip everyone in the class. The boys were lined up, and two soldiers seized the boy at the end, Vladimir Spassky, who resisted and fought back desperately; they stripped him naked, laid him on a bench and began to whip him. The director, his hands behind his back, walked to and fro about the room with uneven steps, while the tutors kept official silence. They flogged Spassky first, then VIetlirsky …a fine troublemaker, but in this affair quite blameless. As he was being whipped, he kept shouting in a heartrending voice that he was innocent. All my insides were trembling. Finally the director shouted for them to stop and went away without saying a word or looking back. We dispersed and went to our rooms.'

On another occasion, a boy with whom Tchaikovsky had become friends was caught smoking. He was sentenced to sixty-five strokes by the brutal Colonel Rutenberg, the Inspector (more like it, Tormentor) of Students. One of Tchaikovsky's classmates, a little boy called Maslov, became almost hysterical and burst into loud sobs. Rutenberg shouted at him that he would lay him out right there and then and thrash him as well. That was enough. The sobbing ceased, and the punishment continued. How the super-sensitive Tchaikovsky remained silent is hard to understand. Or perhaps not, on this particular occasion, because unbeknownst to Rutenberg, Tchaikovsky too, smoked. Peer-pressure, then as now, could be even more persuasive than the witnessing of savage punishments. And it was a habit that stayed with him for life. That, and another addiction, though not a disabling one, picked up at the same school. As he mused, many years later:

> 'It is said that to abuse oneself with alcoholic drink is harmful. I readily agree. But nevertheless, I, that is, a sick person full of neuroses, absolutely cannot do without the alcoholic poison. And now I am drunk every night, and cannot do without it. In the first stage of drunkenness, I feel complete happiness, and understand far more than when I am sober. Also, I have not noticed that my health suffers particularly from it.'

If Rutenberg had known about either the smoking or the drinking, let alone both, the consequences don't bear thinking about. But he didn't. And Tchaikovsky himself was never flogged. As one of his schoolmates recalled,

> 'There was definitely something special about Tchaikovsky that separated him from the other boys and made our hearts go out to him. Kindness, gentleness, responsiveness, and a sort of insouciance with respect to himself were distinctive features of his character from early on. Even the savage Rutenberg showed a special sympathy for him.'

Many years later, after Tchaikovsky's death, his brother Modyest read through the letters which the boy had written to his family, and marvelled:

> 'The first thing one notices is the striking abundance of love in the correspondent. Out of all the thirty nine letters there is not one in which he speaks of anyone

> disapprovingly, not one person for whom he has anything but praise. All those around him are kind to him affectionate, attentive, and he looks on everyone with love and gratitude.'

After two years at the Schmelling School, Tchaikovsky, now ten, was enrolled in the preparatory class in the School of Jurisprudence in St. Petersburg, where he would be trained in the law and groomed as a government civil servant. Before heading home, his mother took him to the Opera for a performance of Glinka's *A Life for the Tsar*, which had Tchaikovsky in transports.

2 Glinka: Overture to A Life for the Tsar

3 Music by Mikhail Glinka, the so-called 'father of Russian music', and a great influence on Tchaikovsky.

But Tchaikovsky's joy on that visit to the opera was short-lived. Throughout his life, he could never remember the moment of his mother's departure without a shudder of horror.

> 'It was the most powerful grief I had ever experienced. Every minute of that horrible day is etched in my memory as if it were yesterday.'

For one eye-witness, too, it was a moment not easily forgotten:

> 'Arriving at the place of separation, Tchaikovsky lost all self control. He pressed himself against his mother and could not tear himself away from her. No caresses, no assurances, no promises of a speedy return could have any effect He heard nothing, saw nothing, and he seemed to merge as one with his venerated mother. It was necessary to resort to force, and the poor child had to be torn away from Aleksandra Andreevna. He clutched at anything he could, unwilling to let her go. At last they succeeded. She took her seat with her daughters in the carriage. The horses started off, and then, gathering the last of his strength, the boy broke away and ran off after the carriage with a mad cry of despair, trying to seize the footboard, the splashboards, anything, in the vain hope of stopping it. Even after thirty years he would confess that he could not calmly pass by that way without experiencing anew that mad despair that possessed him when the carriage carrying away everything most dear to him disappeared from sight.'

With his beloved governess Fanny Dürbach gone (she'd returned to France two years earlier), and with his mother now out of reach except through correspondence, Tchaikovsky felt adrift. More than ever before, he began to suffer from wild mood swings, and the most ordinary things often reduced him to tears. He found some outlet, and some stability, in music of course, and particularly from playing the piano. But not in the ways one might expect. As his friend Herman Laroche remembered,

> 'He played the piano in general very well: boldly, with brilliance, and could play pieces of the greatest difficulty. To my taste at that time his playing was somewhat rough, lacking in warmth and depth of feeling – exactly the opposite of what the contemporary reader might have imagined it to be above all. The point

is that Pyotr Ilich feared sentimentality like the plague and consequently disliked over-expressive piano-playing, making fun of the expressive marking "play with feeling". The musical feeling within him was controlled by a certain chasteness, and out of fear of vulgarity he could go to the opposite extreme.'

4 Dumka, Op. 59

5 Tchaikovsky's musical gifts were more obvious with every passing year, but nobody had yet mentioned the possibility of a career in music, and for nine years, Tchaikovsky remained at the School of Jurisprudence, following the path laid out for him by his parents. The greatest crisis during these years came from the death of his mother in 1854, when Tchaikovsky was only fourteen. Years later he would remember it as though it were yesterday:

'Despite the all-conquering force of my convictions, I shall never reconcile myself to the fact that my mother, whom I loved so much and who was such a beautiful person, is gone forever and that I shall never have the chance to tell her that after twenty-three years of separation I still love her as much as ever.'

A frequent witness to this unresolved bereavement was his brother Modyest:

'He would often recall the unearthly happiness he experienced as he pressed himself to her breast after three or four months of separation. For a very, very long time, even when he was a completely mature man, he could not speak of her without tears; as a consequence, those around him would take great care to avoid the subject.'

In the immediate aftermath of his mother's death, Tchaikovsky's only solace was in music, and perhaps unsurprisingly, it was during this period that he first began seriously to compose.

6 Rêverie de Soir, Op. 19 No. 1

7 Following his graduation in 1859, Tchaikovsky took a job in the Ministry of Justice. He made new friends (this was never a problem to him – he made friends easily, though he frequently denied this), and he enjoyed a rich and varied social life. As one friend put it,

'It was quite impossible not to love him. Everything, starting with his youthful appearance and his marvellous, intense gaze, made him irresistibly attractive. But above all, it was his striking modesty and his touching kindness. No other person could treat everyone so cordially, no one else possessed such a childlike, pure, and bright view of people. Everyone felt, in talking with him, a special warmth and caress in the sound of his voice, in his words, and in his glance.'

But behind his charm and apparent pleasure in conviviality, lay a kind of quiet, almost lazy fatalism. Very Russian. Very Romantic. In addition to his now habitual use of tobacco and alcohol was another weakness, which never left him, and of which he himself was well aware.

> 'When I have money in my pocket I always squander it on pleasures. This is base and foolish, I know; strictly speaking, I can have no money at all for pleasures: there are enormous debts demanding payment, there are necessities of the very first order, but I (because of my weakness) disregard all this and enjoy myself. Such is my character. But how shall I end? I know that sooner or later (and more likely sooner) I shall lose the strength to struggle with the difficult side of life and shall smash myself to pieces. But until then I enjoy life as I can and sacrifice everything to enjoyment.'

By this time, the possibility of his switching from the law to music as a profession was high on the agenda, though his father's inability to support him effectively ruled it out, at least for the moment. But Tchaikovsky was now determined to further his capacities as a musician, and in 1861 he enrolled in a class at the Russian Musical Society, which one year later was established as the St. Petersburg Conservatory, under the directorship of Anton Rubinstein, perhaps the greatest Russian pianist of the 19th century, and a noted composer as well. Rubinstein gave him every encouragement to take the plunge, and in 1863 (he was now twenty-three), Tchaikovsky resigned from his post at the Ministry of Justice and enrolled as a full time student at the Conservatory. But for all his charm and modesty, for all his much-remarked generosity of spirit, he was a young man of very strong opinions.

> 'During this period, Pyotr Ilich had a great many unhealthy musical antipathies. These related not just to composers but to whole genres or composition – more exactly, to their sound. Thus, for instance, he did not like the sound of piano with orchestra, the sound of a string quartet or quintet, and most of all the sound of the piano in combination with one or several stringed instruments. Not just once, nor ten times, nor a hundred times did I hear from him what was almost an oath: that he would never compose a single piano concerto, or a single sonata for violin and piano, or a single trio, quartet, and so on. It's even stranger that about this very time he gave a pledge never to compose either short piano pieces or romances.'

Well those aversions he overcame. His First Piano Concerto became one of the most popular ever written, his string quartets are still played (one of them moved Tolstoy to tears), his piano trio has never been out of the repertoire, and the same goes for a number of his many short piano pieces. His tastes in composers, though, never wavered. And from his early childhood, Mozart was the runaway favourite:

> 'I love Mozart as a musical Christ. Incidentally, he lived just about as long as Christ. I don't think there is anything sacrilegious in this comparison. He was such an angelic creature, of such childlike purity. His music is so filled with a beauty which is unattainably sublime that if anyone can be mentioned in the same breath as Christ then it is Mozart. In talking about Beethoven I have stumbled upon Mozart. It is my profound conviction that Mozart is the loftiest peak of perfection which beauty has attained in the sphere of music. No one has his ability to make me weep, to make me tremble with rapture from the knowledge that I am close to something which we call the ideal.'

8 Mozart, arr. Tchaikovsky: Minuet in D

9 A minuet by Mozart, orchestrated by Tchaikovsky for his orchestral Suite No. 4.

But Tchaikovsky's dislikes, when it came to composers, were no less forthright than his enthusiasms, and in most cases they lasted him a lifetime:

> 'The other day I played over the music of that scoundrel Brahms. What a giftless bastard! It annoys me that this self-inflated mediocrity is hailed as a genius. In comparison with him, even Raff is a giant, not to speak of Rubinstein, who is after all a live and important human being, while Brahms is chaotic and absolutely empty dried-up stuff!'

Well, the anti-Brahmsians were generally pro Wagner. But Tchaikovsky wasn't having any of him either.

> 'Wagner's Rheingold has been performed: as a scenic spectacle this work interested and fascinated me because of the astounding production; as music, however, it is really unbelievable chaos, through which, however, there flash from time to time some beautiful and striking details. At least I wasn't bored, though no one could possibly say that I enjoyed myself.'

And Bach?

> 'Oh I like playing Bach from time to time, because it's interesting to play a good fugue, but I cannot regard him, like some, as a great genius.'

Well, Handel then:

> 'Handel seems to me so fourth-rate that he isn't even interesting.'

Unlike Beethoven, who was generally regarded throughout the 19th century as the greatest composer who ever lived.

> 'I like Beethoven's middle period alright, and some of the first period, but I positively hate the last period, particularly the late quartets. There are flashes there – but, no more than that.'

Well at least that's more generous than Tolstoy, who flatly declared that 'Beethoven had no talent'.

Tchaikovsky's own composing was gaining in fluency and invention but his genius took a long time to surface. Of all his student works, only one gave any real indication of what was in store. If his other compositions were competent but rather anonymous, his orchestral overture to Ostrovsky's play *The Storm* reveals for the first time his distinctive personality as a composer. Not that Handel would have liked it much.

10 Overture in E major Op. 76, 'The Storm'

11 In view of the brash, apparent self-confidence of Tchaikovsky's pronouncements on the great composers, the apparent self-confidence of that music should come as no surprise. Nor should the almost exhibitionist intensity of feeling. As the daughter of one of his closest friends recalled,

> 'Everyone knew how powerfully he was affected by his emotions. If something touched his feelings deeply he surrendered to it entirely, and his reason then became completely subordinated to it.'

His fears, in particular, were obsessive, and sometimes so irrational that it was easy to question his sanity. At his debut as a conductor, at the Conservatory, when he was twenty-five, he conducted the entire performance with his right hand alone, holding the left hand under his chin to prevent his head from falling off. Well with signs like that, it can hardly have come as a surprise to anyone when, only a little time later, he succumbed to a major nervous breakdown.

> 'In July, he broke out in attacks of a terrible nervous disorder such as was never again repeated in his life The doctor – summoned to treat him found that he was "one step away from madness" and during the first days considered his condition to be almost desperate. The main and most dreadful symptoms of this disease were that the patient was tormented by hallucinations, overcome by a terrifying fear of something, and that all his extremities were completely numb.'

But he made a good recovery, and later that year he passed seamlessly from student to teacher. Even before his graduation from the St. Petersburg Conservatory, Anton Rubinstein's brother Nikolai, offered him a teaching post at the Moscow Conservatory, where he was the Director. So in January 1866, Tchaikovsky moved to Moscow, and found there rather more than he'd bargained for. For a start, Rubinstein insisted on Tchaikovsky's moving in with him, lavished on him more attention than Tchaikovsky cared for, and caught him up in a whirl of conviviality which was second nature to Rubinstein but deeply uncomfortable to the shy Tchaikovsky. Nevertheless, Nikolai introduced him to the most powerful movers and shakers in the musical world of Russia at that time. Of these, Nikolai himself was in many ways the most useful, conducting and/or playing in the first performances of many of Tchaikovsky's works, almost to his dying day. And it was Nikolai who encouraged, almost forced Tchaikovsky to write his First Symphony – the very labour that triggered that nervous breakdown. But, with several postponements along the way, he finally finished it, and in 1868 it had its very successful first performance.

12 Symphony No. 1 in G minor, Op. 13

13 Part of Tchaikovsky's First Symphony.

Well it wasn't just audiences who took to Tchaikovsky. It was hard to find anyone who didn't. As one friend recalled,

> ‘Tchaikovsky’s popularity grew not daily but hourly. Everyone who joined his circle fell immediately under his spell. By the beginning of the 1868-1869 season, he was already numbered among Moscow’s greatest favourites, not only as a composer but also as a person.’

Tchaikovsky was now twenty-eight. But for all his tremendous popularity, he’d never shown the slightest romantic interest in any girl or woman. Well now, all that changed. In 1868 he appears to have fallen in love with the opera singer Désirée Artôt. He spent a great deal of time in her company, composed music especially for her, and wrote enthusiastic letters about her to his family. First, to his sister Sasha:

> ‘I must tell you that Artôt is a wonderful person, and we’ve become the greatest of friends. I’m very busy at the moment, writing recitatives and choruses for Auber’s Domino noir, which have to be done in time for her benefit performance.’

And a month later, to his brother Modyest:

> ‘Ah! Modyinka...if you only knew what a singer and artist Artôt is! I’m sorry you can’t hear and see her. How enraptured you’d be by her gestures, and the grace of her movements and posture!’

And later still, to his brother Anatoly:

> ‘I haven’t written to you for a long time, but a variety of circumstances have combined to prevent me from writing letters, for I’ve devoted all my spare time to a person of whom I rather think you’ve heard, and of whom I’m very fond.’

By that time the gossip had got round that she and Tchaikovsky were engaged to be married. And on the 26th of December 1868 he specifically asked his father for advice:

> ‘As I expect that rumours have reached you of my engagement and you may be annoyed that I’ve not written to you on the subject, I’ll explain what it’s all about without more ado. I first became acquainted with Artôt last spring, but saw her only once at a supper party after her benefit performance. After her return here in the autumn a month had elapsed without my calling on her once. Then we happened to meet at a musical evening; she expressed surprise that I hadn’t visited her. I promised to call on her but I wouldn’t have kept the promise (as I find it difficult to get to know people) if Anton Rubinstein, who happened to be passing through Moscow, hadn’t dragged me to her house. From then on I began to receive almost daily invitations from her and gradually I became accustomed to visiting her every evening. Soon we became inflamed with feelings of great affection for one another, resulting at once in a mutual understanding. It goes without saying that there arose immediately the question of marriage, which we both desire and which ought to be accomplished in the summer if nothing happens to prevent it.’

But Nicolai Rubinstein and other friends were doing everything in their power to prevent it.

> ‘They say that in marrying a well-known singer I shall be playing the sorry role of being my wife’s husband. That’s to say that I shall trail along behind her all over Europe, live at her expense and find work quite impossible, in a word that when my ardour has cooled off somewhat, my self-respect will be lost in disillusionment and despair. This could be avoided if she were to settle down to a domestic life with me in Russia, but in spite of all her love for me, she can’t bring herself to give up the stage to which she has got accustomed and which furnishes her with both fame and money. I love her with all my heart and soul, and feel that it is not possible to live any longer without her. On the other hand, cool common sense bids me hesitate...’

Which was just as well. As he wrote to Modyest, after the lady’s departure, and in a tone which in itself speaks volumes.

> ‘The Artôt business has resolved itself in the most amusing way. In Warsaw she has fallen in love with the baritone Padilla, who was the object of her scorn when she was here, and she is marrying him! What of the lady? You would need to know the details of our relationship to have any idea how funny this dénouement is.’

Well, the details were not forthcoming, but it seemed clear to Modyest, and to anyone else who knew Tchaikovsky well, that the amusement was genuine – and that it masked an unspoken sense of relief. It was certainly the last time he found anything to laugh at in his relations with women.

14 For the moment, in any case, he had other things to think about. Topping the list was his imminent professional debut as a conductor, in his own *Characteristic Dances*. But as his friend Nikolai Kashkin remembered, there was nothing about it which suggested a great career in the making:

> ‘I went behind the scenes where the debutant-conductor was, and approached him. He told me that, to his own surprise, he wasn’t feeling in the least bit scared. We talked a little, after which, before his piece, I went off to my seat in the hall. Soon after this Pyotr Ilich appeared. One glance told me that he had gone completely to pieces. The orchestral players were already arranged on stage, and he walked between their desks bending forward, as though he wanted to hide himself. When he finally reached the podium he had the appearance of a man who found himself in a desperate situation. He completely forgot his own piece, saw nothing that was in the score, and failed to give the players their cues in those places where it was really essential. Fortunately the orchestra knew the piece so well that the players paid no attention to his wrong directions, and played the Dances quite satisfactorily, simply grinning when they looked towards the composer.’

It was at around this time that Tchaikovsky first met Hector Berlioz, whose music had – well, was still having – a formative influence on his own, particularly where orchestration was concerned. Berlioz was in Moscow to conduct concerts of his own music – and here was a really great composer-conductor. The greatest of his time. Until the rise of Wagner, there was nobody to touch him.

His visit to Moscow marked a turning point in Tchaikovsky's career as a composer, though Berlioz himself had practically nothing to do with it. It was because of his concerts though, and for this reason alone, that Mily Balakirev had left his stronghold in St. Petersburg and come to Moscow. Balakirev was the lynchpin of the nationalist movement in Russian music. And at this particular time he was the dominant force in a group of five composers – the others were Mussorgsky, Borodin, Rimsky-Korsakov and César Cui – which came to be known as 'the Mighty Handful'. And if we pursue that metaphor a bit further, it has to be said that César Cui, a bitter critic of Tchaikovsky's music, was definitely the little finger. If there was anything mighty about him at all, it was his sense of self-importance and the abandon with which he wielded his critical pen.

Anyway, these five composers – all of them amateurs, and basically self-taught – were reacting against the centuries-old domination of Russian culture by imported western European styles and values. Like Mikhail Glinka, who started the movement in the first half of the century, they believed in a music founded on the styles and principles of authentic Russian folk music and they regarded western-influenced, conservatory-trained musicians like Tchaikovsky and Rubinstein with deep suspicion, almost regarding them as traitors. But at the time of Balakirev's visit to Moscow, Tchaikovsky was young enough to be influenced – to be 'saved', as they saw it. And Balakirev was more than happy to be the saviour.

For all his suspicions, Balakirev recognised Tchaikovsky's exceptional gifts sooner than most, and badly wanted to recruit him for his own circle. Tchaikovsky, for his part, was equally hungry for acceptance and recognition by Balakirev and his group, partly because, like most of us, he craved approval, in general, and partly because he too felt his Russianness very deeply. At one level, his whole life was dominated by a need to reconcile the Russian and the European aspects of his personality, both as a man and as a musician. But his endless, yo-yo-ing travels back and forth, throughout his adult life, were marked by an equal restlessness at both extremes. Wherever he found himself, after only a little time, he was eager to be off to somewhere else. In Russia, he changed houses and locations more often than the average westerner today changes cars. In Europe, he flitted aimlessly about from one country to another, his pleasure often poisoned by home-sickness for a country he need never have left in the first place. All this made him a sitting duck for Balakirev's strong-arm tactics. To read the correspondence between them is to marvel at Tchaikovsky's docility in the face of Balakirev's overweening self-confidence. Balakirev was the only man who ever persuaded Tchaikovsky to rewrite a work several times over, but the reason he succeeded isn't just that he was forceful to the point of brutality, but because he was right, and Tchaikovsky knew it. Balakirev could never match Tchaikovsky in sophistication or genius, which wouldn't have bothered him in the least. But he had a powerful native intelligence, an instinctive but finely honed understanding of musical language and a kind of raw insight into dramatic psychology that many opera composers would have given their eye teeth for, though apart from admiring Glinka's he had no interest in opera himself. And the quite demonstrable fact is that it was largely due to Balakirev's bullying that Tchaikovsky's Fantasy Overture *Romeo and Juliet* turned out to be his first authentic masterpiece. Ironically, it was also the first piece in which Tchaikovsky's own musical personality was evident from first note to last, and in which he unfurled the most beautiful theme he'd yet composed.

15 Romeo and Juliet (Fantasy Overture)

16 It would be wrong to believe that Tchaikovsky's interest in Russian folk music, indeed his interest in musical nationalism, dated from his first acquaintance with Balakirev. Well before meeting Balakirev he'd written music just as Russian in style and content and spirit as anything written by the so-called Mighty Handful. A case in point is his opera *The Voyevoda*, which he followed with an arrangement for piano duet of fifty Russian folksongs. And though he had profited from Balakirev's advice when writing *Romeo and Juliet*, once was enough. He was glad of his contacts with the St. Petersburg Five, and gratified when they approved of what he'd done, but that was as far as it went. From here on, Balakirev was no longer a force in Tchaikovsky's development. And though the Russianness of his music intensified, it did nothing to curb his chronic restlessness or to keep him at home. In 1870 we find him in Paris and Mannheim and Switzerland, in 1871, he takes his holiday in Nice, the year after that finds him in Germany, Switzerland, Italy and France, and in 1874 we find him in Italy again, after the premiere of his tragic opera *The Oprichnik*. The public and the critics had liked it, but Tchaikovsky himself took against it quite violently, and if he hadn't already sold it to a publisher he would have destroyed the score, just as he had done with his first two operas.

In November, he started work on his First Piano Concerto. At the beginning of 1875 he played it over to Nikolai Rubinstein, and immediately wished he hadn't. Rubinstein, perhaps his most dedicated champion, pronounced the work unplayable and tore into it with a savagery that left Tchaikovsky trembling and speechless.

> 'To put it briefly, an outsider might well have thought that I was a madman, an incompetent and ignorant scribbler pestering the famous musician with my rubbish! I was staggered and dumbfounded that such a dressing-down should be given to someone who had already written a great deal and who taught the free composition course at the Conservatoire. I left the room without saying anything and went upstairs. I could not speak from anger and agitation. Rubinstein soon appeared and, noticing how upset I was, called me into one of the rooms some distance away. There he again repeated that the concerto was impossible and, after pointing out a large number of passages which required radical alteration, said that if by a specified time I revised the concerto in accordance with his demands he would do me the honour of playing my piece in one of his concerts. "I will not revise a single note", I replied, "and I will publish it in exactly the form it is now!" And I did.'

17 Piano Concerto No. 1 in B flat minor, Op. 23

CD 2

1 Needless to say, it was not Nikolai Rubinstein who gave the concerto its first performance. That privilege went to the great German pianist and conductor Hans von

Bülow, in Boston, Massachusetts, of all unlikely places. And incidentally, Rubinstein later changed his mind and became one of the work's greatest champions.

In the following year, Tchaikovsky composed two more major works, his Third Symphony, which was very well received (though today it's almost forgotten) and his first ballet *Swan Lake* – which was not well received but soon became one of the most popular works ever written. And why was it not well received? Because the music was too good. Up until that time, in Russia anyway, ballet music was regarded as little more than a convenient and generally pleasant accompaniment to the dancing on stage – which, after all, is what the audience had come to see. The standard fare was provided by such relatively undistinguished composers as Minkus, Gerber, Pugni, Adam and so on (how many of us today could whistle a single tune by any of them?). Their job was to be suitably atmospheric but discreet. The music should on no account be distracting, and above all it shouldn't indulge in the vivid characterisation which was – is – the life blood of opera. But Tchaikovsky was never cut out to accompany psychological puppets, and *Swan Lake* was considered too operatic by half.

From early childhood onwards, Tchaikovsky's relation to music was overwhelmingly, perhaps even uniquely emotional, and he could no more distance himself from his characters than he could get up there and dance the roles himself. Tchaikovsky basically changed the rules of Russian ballet, he moved the goal posts, as it were, and the reason he could get away with it – which he eventually did – was because he had a genius for melody – and melody which positively cried out to be danced to. He had a sense of theatrical atmosphere second to none, and he could paint with an orchestra the way the greatest set-designers could paint the scenery. It all proved ultimately irresistible, and his ballets are still the most famous and popular ever written: *Swan Lake, The Sleeping Beauty, The Nutcracker* – just three. But what a three they are:

2 'Rose Adagio' from The Sleeping Beauty

3 All in all, 1875 had been a good year for Tchaikovsky, and it was crowned by the joy of new friendship, with the brilliant French composer and pianist Camille Saint-Saëns, who was visiting Moscow on a concert tour. But it was another French composer who made an overwhelming impression on Tchaikovsky only weeks later.

In 1876, Tchaikovsky and his brother Modyest visited Paris, where they attended a performance of Bizet's opera *Carmen*. Neither of them had heard it before. Tchaikovsky at once conceived what Modyest described as a 'quite unhealthy passion' for the music, and it's only a slight exaggeration to say that his own music was never the same again. Tchaikovsky became obsessed with the fate-laden atmosphere and the sheer raw emotionalism of the work, both of which now began to appear in his own music to a greater degree than ever before. For his own next opera, and under the direct influence of *Carmen*, he thought of adapting the Fifth Canto of Dante's *Inferno*, dealing with the story of Francesca da Rimini. For various reasons, one of them being problems with the libretto, he decided in the end to make it an orchestral rather than an operatic work, but the result was dramatic enough for any theatre, and considerably more dramatic than Tchaikovsky's next and most famous opera was to be.

4 Francesca da Rimini (Symphonic Fantasy)

5 The idea that you can deduce a composer's state of mind from the works that he or she writes at any given moment is easy enough to accept when you have a composer as blatantly emotional as Tchaikovsky, but even here it's a chancy business. Because dating from exactly the same period as the stormy, passionate *Francesca da Rimini* are the lightweight, almost demure *Variations on a Rococo Theme for cello and orchestra*. And it's unlikely that two works composed at the same time by the same composer have ever been more strikingly different than these two.

6 Variations on a Rococo Theme in A major, Op. 33

7 In the very difference between *Francesca da Rimini* and those Variations lies what may be the most important key for unlocking the secrets of Tchaikovsky's inner life. Namely the almost continual struggle between despair and hope. Between the passionate chaos of his emotional intensity and the carefully structured ordering of its articulation through music. I think it's probably fair to say that at least a part of his great reverence for Mozart was a longing for the clear-cut ideals and assumptions of the time in which he lived. The dedication to proportion, symmetry, restraint – the channelling of emotion into pre-ordained forms. And a respect for privacy. In Mozart's time, the inner lives of composers were nobody's business but their own.

It would be stretching a point to say that Tchaikovsky was a split personality, in the normally accepted psychiatric sense, but he often veered from one extreme to another in such a short space of time that it could easily seem that he was actually two people at once. On the subject of Venice, for instance, his feelings would seem to have been unequivocally clear:

> 'Venice is such a city that if were forced to be here for a whole week, I should hang myself out of despair on the fifth day. Everything is concentrated on the Piazza San Marco. Beyond this, no matter where you go, you wind up in a labyrinth of stinking passageways leading nowhere, and until you sit in some gondola and order yourself taken about, you'll have no idea where you are. Boating along the Grand Canal isn't too bad, as there are palaces, palaces, and yet more palaces, all in marble and each better than the one before it, though at the same time each is dirtier and more neglected than the last. But the Doges' Palace is the height of beauty and interest, with its romantic aura of the Council of Ten, the Inquisition, tortures, oubliettes, and other such delights. Still, I ran through it thoroughly twice again and, to clear my conscience, visited two or three other churches with a whole sea of paintings by Titian and Tintoretto, statues by Canova, and all sorts of aesthetic jewels. But the city is gloomy, as though it were deserted. Not only are there no horses, I haven't even seen a single dog.'

Well, perhaps. But… on the other hand:

> ‘I’m absolutely captivated by the special charm of this wonderful city! I’ve been chasing around Venice all day in sheer delight! And every day I discover new pleasures. We went to see the church of the Frari recently, which, amongst other beautiful things, contains Canova’s mausoleum. What a miracle of beauty!’

Paris, though, made a good impression from the start:

> ‘In general, life in Paris is extremely pleasant. Here you can do anything you like. The only thing you can’t do is be bored. You’ve only to step out onto the boulevards and already you feel cheerful.’

Well, it all depends, of course.

> ‘The main thing is that I really don’t want to go to Paris. I find it sickening. It bores me! Without exaggerating, I would far rather be sentenced to penal servitude than go to Paris.’

And what applied to places, also applied to people. Tchaikovsky was a man whose statements, particularly his most extreme statements, should never be taken at face value. For almost every one, you can find its exact opposite. If not in speech, then in behaviour.

> ‘In general, I hate the human race, and should gladly withdraw into the desert, with only the smallest retinue.’

When he said these things, they were undoubtedly true – for him, at that moment. But if this attitude to humanity was constant, then Tchaikovsky was one of the greatest masters of deceit who ever lived. Remember the letters he wrote from the Schmelling School when he was eight. Remember the enormous and ever-growing popularity he knew in the early Moscow years. And what about this, from his doctor, after Tchaikovsky’s death.

> ‘They say – he said himself – that Pyotr Ilyich was a misanthrope, but was this really so? True, he used to avoid people and felt most comfortable in his solitude, and this to such a degree that even people as close to his heart as his sister and brothers could be a burden to him. Yet all this in no way stemmed from a dislike of people but, on the contrary, from an excess of love for them. He wished everything and everyone well and was only truly happy when he had succeeded in making someone else happy, or helping someone, or supporting something beautiful.’

And this was the general view. If Tchaikovsky really was a misanthrope, if he really despised the human race, then he was not only a master of deceit, but a masochist:

> ‘His hospitality knew no bounds. Thus, for instance, when he was greeted while abroad with a serenade, he issued an invitation to all those who had taken part, and entertained them royally without thinking of the expense. Playing host to his friends was always a great pleasure to Pyotr Ilich, and he would spare no expense. For anyone at all practical his attitude towards money was simply incomprehensible, but with Tchaikovsky that’s exactly how it was.’

The emotional floodgates opened in him by *Carmen* could only intensify Tchaikovsky's inner turmoil over his secret (or by then perhaps not so secret) sexuality. Homosexuality at that time, in Russia as elsewhere, was generally regarded as a disease, which was at least potentially curable. And, also as elsewhere, it was much commoner than generally admitted – still very much (to use a famous phrase) 'the love that dare not speak its name', and it was in the highly confused and ambivalent hope of resolving his difficulties in this line that the genius Tchaikovsky made the worst, and least intelligent decision of his life. As he wrote to Modyest, who, as it happens, was also homosexual,

> 'I am now going through a very critical period of my life. I will go into more detail later, but for now I will simply tell you: I have decided to get married. It is unavoidable. I must do it, not just for myself but for you, Modyest, as well, and for Tolya, and Sasha, and all those I love. During this period I have changed many of my ideas about myself. The result of all this thinking is that from now on I will make serious preparations for entering into a lawful marriage alliance – regardless of the identity of the other party. I believe that for both of us (you and I), our dispositions are the greatest and most insuperable obstacle to happiness and that we must fight our natures to the best of our ability.'

This was a theme he repeatedly returned to – more, it would appear, to convince himself than anyone else. To Modyest again,

> 'I will do my utmost to get married this year and if I lack the necessary courage, I will at any rate abandon my habits for ever and will try to stop people regarding me as "one of the old dears"'.

Modyest was sceptical about his brother's plans, to say the least. He also encouraged him to disregard whatever people might say about his inclinations. Tchaikovsky himself took a subtler and more complex view.

> 'I understand what you say, but only up to a point. There are those who cannot hold me in contempt for my vices simply because they started to love me before they suspected that my reputation is, in fact, ruined… Surely you realize how painful it is for me to know that people pity and forgive me when, in truth, I am guilty of nothing. How appalling it is to think that those who love me are sometimes ashamed of me! But this has happened dozens of times already and, of course, it will happen dozens of times again. In short, I seek marriage or some sort of public involvement with a woman so as to shut the mouths of assorted contemptible creatures whose opinions mean nothing to me but who are in a position to cause distress to those near to me.'

Not to mention himself. However rationally Tchaikovsky may have thought he was approaching the matter, it was taking a terrible toll on his peace of mind.

8 The Tempest, Op. 18

9 On his way back from a trip to Germany, Tchaikovsky confided,

> ‘I arrived at Verbovka in a terrible mental state, and with my nerves utterly shattered. Two weeks there were sufficient for my spirits to rise a little, but the fact is that there are hours, days, weeks, and months when everything looks black, when it seems that no one loves you, that you have been flung aside and abandoned by everybody. Apart from the fact that my nerves are weak and sensitive, my depression is to be explained precisely by my bachelor state, by the absence of any element of self-sacrifice in my life. I do, in fact, live up to my vocation to the best of my ability but I am no use at all to any human being. If I were swept off the face of the earth today, then Russian music would perhaps suffer some small loss, but no more.’

It was at this very point, as though on cue from some capricious fate, that two women entered Tchaikovsky’s life who were soon to occupy a central part in it. One was mature, extremely cultured and unimaginably wealthy, the other was young, unsophisticated, not evidently very intelligent and certainly not rich.

Nadezhda Filaretovna von Meck was the forty-four-year-old widow of a hugely prosperous railway baron. Of their eighteen children, eleven survived and seven still lived with her. When she travelled, as she frequently did, it was on her own special trains, with her family and domestic household in attendance, these always including a hired musician to play for her (one of these, in later years, was the young Debussy). In 1876, though, it was a former pupil of Tchaikovsky’s, the violinist Joseph Kotek. Since the death of her husband, von Meck had become a recluse who abhorred humanity at large and whose acquaintance with the outside world was limited to the reports of a close circle of informants, one of whom was Nikolai Rubinstein. It was through Kotek and Rubinstein that she became acquainted with Tchaikovsky’s music. After a few generous commissions of mostly minor works and arrangements, she entered into a long and sometimes complex correspondence with Tchaikovsky, the like of which has never been seen before or since. She also began to send him large sums of money, with no strings attached, as it were, but on one very strange condition – namely, that they should never meet. And they never did. Once or twice they did actually see one another but passed each other by without a word. Yet under these bizarre circumstances they developed, through music and correspondence alone, the most intimate, at times even the most passionate friendship either of them had ever known.

Putting her own cards on the table at the outset, Madame von Meck expressed herself in unique terms and provided Tchaikovsky with a verbal self-portrait whose unguarded intimacy and fearless candour grabbed and held his attention with all the tenacity of a well-trained terrier. A woman who wrote like this was clearly a force to be reckoned with:

> ‘I am very unsympathetic in my personal relations because I do not possess any femininity whatever; second, I do not know how to be tender, and this characteristic has passed on to my entire family. All of us are afraid to be affected or sentimental, and therefore the general nature of our family relationships is comradely or masculine, so to speak.’

Afraid of sentimentality she may have been, but she was not afraid of expressing emotion. Well before the annuity which effectively made him a rich man, she wrote to Tchaikovsky in terms which could easily have frightened him, but didn’t:

> ‘As soon as I had recovered from the first impression of your music, I at once wished to know what sort of man had created it. I began to seek out opportunities to learn as much about you as possible, passing up no chance to hear something, listening to public opinion, to individual judgments, to every remark. I shall tell you in this regard that often what others censured in you would lead me to ecstasy. I am interested in knowing everything there is to know about you, so that at almost any time I can say where you are and to some extent what you are doing. From everything that I myself have observed in you and have heard from other sympathetic and unsympathetic sources, I have conceived the most cordial, kindly and enthusiastic feelings for you.’

But this was just a beginning. Cordiality, kindliness and enthusiasm soon gave way to something infinitely more intense. With almost every letter, Madame von Meck came less and less to resemble that self-portrait from the beginning of their correspondence.

> ‘You are the only person who affords me such profound, such sublime happiness, and for this I am boundlessly grateful to you and can only pray that what brings me this happiness will never cease and never change, because such a loss would be most painful for me. It is impossible for me to describe what good your dear letters offer me, what a beneficent balm they are to my weary heart, possessed by uncontrollable longing. When I come out to my sitting room and find on the table an envelope with that so familiar, dear handwriting, I feel a sensation as from a whiff of ether that stops any pain. My love for you is also fate, against which my will is quite powerless. My God, how much brighter and warmer has my life become, how greatly has your consideration rewarded me, how much is redeemed by such a nature as yours!’

And Tchaikovsky responded in kind:

> ‘I love you with all the strength of my soul, and every minute I bless the fate that brought me together with you. With each new letter I come to wonder anew at your astounding kindness.’

10 Waltz from the Sleeping Beauty

11 Though nothing overtly sexual ever creeps into their correspondence, it’s almost impossible to believe that there wasn’t a decidedly sexual element on the part of both Tchaikovsky and Madame von Meck. If there had been a woman composer who wrote music just like Tchaikovsky’s, it seems unlikely that Madame von Meck would ever have undertaken the correspondence in the first place. And there’s an unmistakable element of jealousy in von Meck’s references to the second woman who dominated Tchaikovsky’s life in the early part of their correspondence.

In the Spring of 1877, quite out of the blue, Tchaikovsky received a letter from a clearly infatuated girl, one Antonina Milyukova, who claimed to have been in his class at the conservatory. Tchaikovsky himself had no memory of her, and in any case, he was already getting used to letters of this kind. Well, not quite of this kind. The fact is that

this letter was different from all the others in several respects. It lodged itself in his mind at once, and he couldn't shake it. As he reported to Madame von Meck,

> 'I learned from her letter that she had already bestowed her love on me some time before. The letter had been written so genuinely, so warmly, that I decided to answer it, something I had carefully avoided in similar cases before. And although my reply did not offer the young lady any hope of reciprocity, a correspondence between us began.'

Madame von Meck at this point knew nothing of Tchaikovsky's determination to get married. But his bulletins on this new woman in his life can hardly have been her favourite reading. 'She is twenty-eight years old,' he later reported,

> '…and really rather pretty. Her reputation is immaculate. Out of love of independence she has been living by her own labour, although she has a very loving mother. She is utterly poor, educated not above an average level, apparently very kind, and capable of permanent attachments.'

Just how permanent he was to discover to his cost. Although he professed to have no memory of her, her own account of their earlier acquaintance suggests either that he was lying – which seems unlikely – or that she was already deeply mired in a fantasy world of her own. She had enrolled at the Conservatory in the early 1870s,

> '…and I was extremely happy there, meeting him constantly; he was always terribly affectionate to me. For more than four years I had loved him secretly. I knew perfectly well that he liked me, but he was shy and would never have made a proposal himself. I made a pledge to myself to go every day for six weeks to the chapel at the Spassky Gates to pray for him, no matter what the weather… After the six weeks I ordered a liturgy in the chapel and, having prayed some more at home, I mailed him a letter in which I poured out to him on the paper all my love that had accumulated over so many years. He answered me at once, and we started a correspondence.'

Of that, none of Tchaikovsky's letters to her have survived, and the first extant letter from her to him is probably her third:

> 'I already see that it's time for me to begin to restrain my feelings, which you yourself mentioned to me in your first letter. Now, though I can't see you, I console myself with the thought that you are in the same city with me, whereas in a month, or maybe even less, you will most likely leave, and God knows whether I shall ever see you again, because I, too, do not plan to stay in Moscow. But wherever I may be, I will never be able to forget you or stop loving you… I do not want to look at any other man after you.'

In fact, Tchaikovsky had already left Moscow. On discovering this, she immediately wrote to him again:

> 'Could you really stop our correspondence without seeing me even once? No, I am certain you will not be so cruel! After your last letter I fell in love with you twice as much, and your shortcomings mean absolutely nothing to me. Perhaps if you were perfection, I might have remained quite cool towards you. I am dying

with longing and burning with a desire to see you. There is no shortcoming that would make me stop loving you. This is not a momentary infatuation, but a feeling that has developed over the course of a very long time, and I am quite unable now to blot it out, nor do I want to. I think only of that moment when I see you again. I shall be ready to throw my arms around your neck and smother you with kisses. My first kiss will be given to you and to no one else in the world.'

But then she really turns on the heat:

'Good-bye, my dear. Do not try to make me disappointed in you any more, because you'll only be wasting your time. I cannot live without you, and that's why soon, perhaps, I shall kill myself. So let me look at you and kiss you so that I can remember this kiss in the next world. Good-bye. Eternally yours, A.M.'

Not wanting a suicide on his conscience, Tchaikovsky on his return to Moscow agreed to see her. And almost instantly regretted it.

'Why did I do this? It now seems to me as though some power of fate was drawing me to this girl. When I saw her I explained to her again that my only feelings for her were of sympathy and of gratitude for her love. But when we had parted, I began to reflect on my action and all its frivolity. If I did not love her and did not want to encourage her sentiments, then why had I visited her and how would it all end? From her next letter I realised that if, having gone thus far, I suddenly turned away from the girl, I would make her truly unhappy and would bring her to a tragic end. And so, one fine evening, I set off to see my future wife and told her frankly that I did not love her but that at least I would be her devoted and grateful friend; I described my character to her in detail: irritable, unpredictable, unsociable. Then I asked her, did she want to be my wife? The answer was, of course, affirmative. I cannot put into words the dreadful sensations I went through in the days immediately following. I decided that I could not escape my destiny and that there was something fateful in my encounter with this girl. So be it. God can see that I am filled with the very best intentions towards my partner in life, and that if we are unhappy together it will not be my fault. If I am marrying without love it is because circumstances have turned out that way. I have not lied to her or deceived her.'

And even if he had, he couldn't have deceived her as completely as she deceived herself.

The marriage went ahead, and from the word go it was a catastrophe. There were only two witnesses, Tchaikovsky's brother Anatoly and his friend Kotek, and Tchaikovsky himself was in a state of almost paralytic anxiety and grief. Grief for himself, and for his hapless wife. And grief, too, for their future, whether together or apart.

12 Romeo and Juliet (Fantasy Overture)

13 **'**I got married in accordance with the dictates, not of the heart, but of some incomprehensible conjunction of circumstances which led me, as though by fate, to choose the most difficult of options. As soon as the ceremony was over, as

> soon as I found myself alone with my wife and realized that it was now our destiny to live together, inseparable, I suddenly felt that not only did she not inspire in me even simple friendship but that she was utterly detestable, in the fullest sense of the word. It seemed to me that I, or at least the best, perhaps the only good part of me – my musical talent – had perished beyond recall. So far as my future lot was concerned, the picture rose before my eyes of vegetating miserably, of an utterly intolerable, oppressive farce. I fell into deep despair. I began passionately, hungrily to long for death. Death seemed to me the only way out, but I could not contemplate killing myself. I knew that if I made my mind up to commit suicide it would be a mortal blow to my family. Apart from that, my weakness (if it can be called a weakness) is that I love life, I love my work, I love the successes awaiting me in the future. And finally, I have still not said all that I can and want to say before the time comes to depart for eternity. So, death has not yet taken me and I do not wish, nor am I able, to seek it. What then remains? Oh, I do not know why I did not go mad.'

Truth to tell, he almost did. A week after the wedding, he wrote to his brother Anatoly,

> 'It seemed to me, when I awoke, the morning after, that my life was broken and I fell into a fit of despair. Beginning today, however, the terrible crisis has passed. I am beginning to recover. But, oh, the crisis was terrible, terrible, terrible; were it not for my love for you and my other dear ones, who supported me in the midst of the most unbearable mental torments, it might have ended badly, that is, with my illness or even madness.'

But the story was only beginning.

> 'As time went on, I fell into the deepest despair. I looked for death; this seemed to me the only way out. I began to be overcome by moments of madness, during which my soul was filled with such fierce hatred of my unfortunate wife that I wanted to strangle her.'

And later:

> 'When I see her, the blood runs cold in my veins with horror! What can be more dreadful than to behold with one's own eyes this most loathsome creation of nature! And why are such reptiles born!'

Yet in the midst of all this, to Tchaikovsky's intense annoyance, his wife wore, in his own words, 'a perpetual expression of complete happiness and contentment' and she seemed completely unaware of her husband's true feelings.

> 'What meaning have all our ordeals, failures and adversities when compared with the force of my love for you and of your love for me! Whatever may happen to me, I know that in your love I shall always find support and consolation. Even now you do not leave my mind for a second and your dear image consoles, encourages, and supports me.'

And of their life together in Moscow that autumn, when Tchaikovsky was suffering unspeakable torments, she reports,

> ‘Surreptitiously and unnoticed by him, I was always admiring him, especially during morning tea; he just breathed freshness, always so handsome with his kind eyes that I was simply entranced by him. I would sit and think to myself while looking at him: “Thank God he is mine and no one else’s! Nobody can take him away from me, because he is my husband!”’

But he could take himself away. Or so he thought. In utter despair, Tchaikovsky decided to take his life. But he was determined to do it in such a way that no one would be able to suspect suicide. Well they never did. Because, he was even more inept than a notorious 20th century Englishwoman who tried to shoot herself, and missed. Anyway, one cold September evening, he waded into the River Moscow and immersed himself until his body was seized with cramps. When he got home, he explained that he’d stumbled and fallen into the river. He was sure that he would catch pneumonia and die. But such was the strength of his constitution that he never even caught a cold. This, anyway, is the story told in almost every biography of Tchaikovsky, based entirely on the testimony of one man: his friend (and not a close friend) Nikolai Kashkin, who claimed to have had the story from Tchaikovsky himself, many years after the event. Well, whatever the truth of the matter, there’s no doubt at all that Tchaikovsky was bent on escape in some form.

> ‘One thing is certain. I never want to spend another day with Antonina Ivanovna! I would sooner agree to any torment than ever to lay eyes on her again. It is folly to dream of altering her and making of her a suitable helpmate. In the first place, experience has proved that for me to live together with a wife is madness. In the second, even if it were possible, it could never be with her. I have never met a more unpleasant human being. But how am I to have done with her? I know only this: that I must hide for at least a year.’

Which he proceeded to do. Or at least intended to. Needless to say, this was not a plan he confided to his wife.

> ‘One day, he told me he needed to go away on business. For three days. I accompanied him to the mail train; his eyes were wandering, he was nervous, but I was so far in my thoughts from any trouble already hanging over my head. Before the first bell he had a spasm in his throat and went alone with jerky irregular steps to the station to drink some water. Then we entered the car; he looked at me plaintively, without lowering his eyes… And he never came back to me.’

The business was genuine. He’d been asked to go to St. Petersburg in connection with a forthcoming revival of one his operas. But almost immediately on his arrival in the city he suffered a devastating emotional collapse. A week or so later, he left Russia, apparently on doctor’s orders, and in the company of his brother Anatoly, arrived in Switzerland at the beginning of October to begin his convalescence. And it was at this point that he began regularly to speak of his wife in terms of violent hatred, now referring to her solely as ‘the reptile’. For the rest of his life, any mention or news of her apparently reduced him to a state of hysteria. Except in his correspondence with Madame von Meck. Here they both refer to the hapless woman as ‘the certain individual’, never risking the consequences of mentioning her name.

14 It was during his convalescence in Switzerland that Tchaikovsky wrote a long letter to Madame von Meck, in which he virtually begs her for money, while never actually saying as much.

> 'It is terrible, it is painfully tearfully difficult, but I must bring myself to do it, must resort to your inexhaustible kindness. Is it not strange that life brought me together with you just at the time when I, having committed a long string of lunacies, must turn to you with a request for help!… I feel that everyone must now despise me for my faintheartedness, weakness, and stupidity. I am mortally afraid that you, too, may experience fleetingly a feeling close to contempt. But this is the result of morbid suspiciousness. In essence, I know that you will understand instinctively that I am a wretched but not a bad person. O my dear beloved friend! Amid my torments in Moscow, when it seemed to me that but for death there was no escape, when I had given myself up entirely to hopeless despair, the thought sometimes flashed through me that you might save me. When my brother, seeing that I had to be taken somewhere far away, took me abroad, I again thought that without your help I could not manage and that you would again appear as my deliverer from life's afflictions. And now, as I write this letter and am tormented by pangs of conscience toward you, still I feel that you are my true friend who can read my soul, despite the fact that we know each other only through our letters.'

By return of post, Madame von Meck wrote to Tchaikovsky exactly as he'd hoped she would.

> ' My dear Pyotr Ilyich, why do you distress and hurt me thus by worrying so much about material matters? By worrying this way, you mar for me the happiness of looking after you and seem to suggest that I am not someone close to you. Why do you do think this is? It pains me.'

With this same letter, Madame von Meck, in a separate note which has never been found, settled on Tchaikovsky a lavish annuity of 6,000 roubles so that he could devote himself entirely to composition. This, needless to say, was more than anything he could possibly have foreseen. His response was immediate and predictable. 'My dear beloved friend,' he wrote,

> 'There are feelings for which there are no words. And if I were to try to find expressions capable of depicting what you inspire in me, I fear the result would be hollow phrases. But you read my heart, do you not? Let me say only this: until meeting you, I never knew that there might exist anyone with so unfathomably tender and sublime a soul. I am equally amazed both by what you do for me and by how you do it. I thank you for all this, my priceless friend, from the very bottom of my heart. Every note that flows from my pen from now on will be dedicated to you.'

This certainly didn't hurt his recovery. Soon he was able to look back on the terrible events of the last few months with something almost like detachment:

> 'When I think of all that I did, of all the crazy things I got up to, I can only come to the conclusion that I was afflicted with a bout of temporary insanity from

> which I have finally emerged only now. Much of the recent past is like a dream to me, strange and wild, like a nightmare in which someone, who to all intents and purposes seemed to be me, behaved exactly as people do in dreams: senselessly, incoherently, wildly. This was not me, conscious of my own personality and exercising the normal resources of my will-power in a reasonable and logical way. Everything I did then bore the stamp of that morbid disjunction between reason and the will which is, in fact, the mark of madness.'

15 Romeo and Juliet

CD 3

1 Weeks rather than months later, Tchaikovsky awoke one morning, and looked around him with the kind of dazed relief that follows the escape from a nightmare. He could hardly believe his luck.

> 'Not only have I not perished, when that seemed the only course open to me, but things are fine now and the future is dawning in happiness and success.'

With the floodgates of his creativity now re-opened, he returned to composition duly refreshed, and by the beginning of the new year, 1878, he'd put the finishing touches to his Fourth Symphony, the first of his works to be dedicated to his new benefactress. The work itself, though, reflects far more of the desperate trauma surrounding his marriage than of his emergence at the hands of Madame von Meck. Tchaikovsky had ambivalent feelings about the romantic mania for so-called 'programme music', but for the sake of Madame von Meck he sketched out one for 'their' symphony, as he always called it. Thus we learn that the very opening music is the 'Fate' motif which is 'the germ of the whole symphony'. He compared it to 'the sword of Damocles, that hangs over our heads.' The main theme of the first movement conveys feelings of 'hopelessness and depression'. The secondary theme represents an 'escape from reality into a world of dreams', and so forth. But these moods are so clear from the music itself that any kind of explanatory 'programme' is completely superfluous.

2 Symphony No. 4 in F minor, Op. 36

3 By general consent, the greatest of Tchaikovsky's work from this period, intimately bound up with the fiasco of his marriage' is the finest of all his operas, *Eugene Onegin*, which could hardly be more different from the storm-tossed, tortured passions of the Fourth Symphony.

The relationship between circumstance and musical creation is notoriously difficult to define. As we saw with the melodramatic *Francesca da Rimini* and the lightweight 'Rococo' Variations, Tchaikovsky, like Mozart, had a knack for composing polar opposites in response to a single event. In many ways, the turbulent, tortured passions of the Fourth Symphony seem to come from a different world from the elegant, unhurried *Onegin*. From the beginning, Tchaikovsky was worried that this adaptation of Pushkin's

most famous novel would have too little action to find favour with audiences. He was careful to bill it not as an opera at all but as 'Lyrical or Elegiac Scenes in Three Acts'. But this was never essentially an opera designed for others. It was something he had to write for himself, and he claimed while composing it that if it failed to enter the repertory it would bother him hardly at all. When it was finished, though, he was singularly impatient to have it published and performed as soon as possible. In the event, it received its first, semi-private, production in 1879 at the Imperial College of Music in Moscow, and its first public performance, again in Moscow, a year later, when it had a very lukewarm reception from critics and audience alike.

Tchaikovsky may not have been one of the so-called 'Mighty Handful', with their principled nationalism, but in the opinion of many people, including such notables as Sergei Prokoviev and Igor Stravinsky, *Eugene Onegin* the most Russian opera ever written. The influence of folk music is plainly there, not at all as an injection of nationalistic spice, but as a means of enhancing the difference in character between pastoral and urban life. 'Criticise *Onegin* if you like,' Tchaikovsky wrote to his brother Modyest, 'but I'm composing it with the most enormous pleasure.' And who would guess from that line that he was in the middle of the greatest crisis in his life. Music was in many ways his saviour.

Tchaikovsky's best operas were the ones in which he could most closely identify with the characters. And the parallels here were both close and obvious. Like Onegin himself, Tchaikovsky had recently received an impassioned love letter from a young woman who hardly knew him, and it seems to have been Tatyana's letter scene in Pushkin's novel that persuaded him to take on the opera (his first impulse had been to set the scene separately, as a self-contained concert aria). But perhaps the greatest aria of all is the one in which Lensky, who is shortly to be killed by the caddish Onegin in a duel, reflects on his life, his former happiness and his present indifference as to whether he lives or dies.

4 Lensky's Aria from Eugene Onegin

5 With the completion of the Fourth Symphony and *Onegin*, Tchaikovsky had paid his musical debts to the recent past, and could now concentrate on the future. And the first thing that took shape in his mind was a violin concerto. He made a start on it, and the composition flowed like oil. He was back in top form, and exhilarated in a way he hadn't been for many months. Within a surprisingly short time he was able to announce,

> 'The first movement of the Violin Concerto is finished already. From the first moment that the right frame of mind came to me, it has never left me. With one's inner life in this condition composing ceases altogether to be work: it becomes an unalloyed pleasure.'

6 Violin Concerto in D, Op. 35 (Mvt 1)

7 For all Tchaikovsky's optimism at the time, he wasn't by any means out of the woods where the trauma of his marriage was concerned. Well over a year after finishing the Violin Concerto he was still subject to episodes of social paralysis which all but disabled him. The singer Alexandra Panayeva, already well-known as a champion of his music, first met him at a dinner party in 1879.

> 'The whole company arrived, and strained conversation was kept up in the drawing room until dinner. Pyotr Ilich sat, totally confused and with eyes lowered, between his brothers, who did not take their eyes off him. At dinner it was exactly the same… After dinner everyone went into the reception room and, having conversed in a whisper about something, Anatoly Ilich asked me to sing. Pyotr Ilich sat at the piano, I went to the instrument, but the brothers asked me to stand a little further off, while they themselves sat like guards on either side of the composer. The latter quietly turned to his brother: "Anatoly, ask her to sing some Mozart." In his turn Anatoly Ilich turned to me: "Piotr Ilich is asking for some Mozart." I sang an aria from The Marriage of Figaro and Pamina's aria from The Magic Flute. Pyotr Ilich was silent for a moment, sighed, somehow helplessly dropped his hands onto his knees, and barely audibly said: "How nice!" then: "Modyest, ask her for something else." Both twins turned to me with beaming faces: "He liked it, and he asks you to sing something more." By degrees he became livelier, but he communicated his impressions only to his brothers, who eventually bore him away.'

In the following year, Tchaikovsky's father died.

> 'I bore my family sorrow without too great a shock, however. Time hardens people and accustoms them to losses. But I am dreadfully sad to think that I will never see my dear kind old father again.'

And again, we find a surprising contrast between the character of the music he was writing and the state of his mind at the time. In the same letter, he reports:

> 'I am still in the same nervous and irritable condition as before. I am sleeping badly and have generally fallen apart. However I have been working very well for the last few days, and I've already completed the sketches for an Italian Fantasia on folk tunes, for which I foresee a rosy future. It will be effective thanks to the delightful tunes which I've succeeded in collecting, partly from albums, and partly with my own ears from the streets.'

8 Capriccio Italien, Op. 45

9 Part of the *Capriccio Italien*, which Tchaikovsky began in Rome, in the immediate aftermath of his father's death, and finished on his return to Russia.

As ever, Tchaikovsky's enthusiasm for Italy waned, and his thoughts turned, almost obsessively, to Russia. That old saying about the grass always being greener on the other side of the fence might have been coined specifically to describe Tchaikovsky.

> ‘I like travelling abroad for relaxation; it is the greatest of pleasures. But I could live only in Russia. Only by living somewhere else do you realize how much, despite all its faults, you love our dear country.’

But once back in that dear country, he almost immediately began to dream of Italy, or Switzerland, or France – or – well, you name it.

> ‘It’s a strange thing. When I am in Russia, I dream, from morning until evening, even at night, about going abroad as soon as possible, and in general I seem to yearn to leave here. Yet nowhere am I at home. I am a nomad.’

One of the appeals of travelling was that, depending on the place, he could be reasonably free of being accosted by acquaintances, or admirers who would like to be acquaintances. One story he used to tell against himself, though he found it very amusing, concerned the time when he was walking down the street, abroad somewhere, far from Russia, when a lady cried out delightedly, in Russian, ‘Why, Pyotr Ilyich! What a wonderful surprise!’ ‘I’m sorry, Madam,’ he instantly replied, also in Russian, ‘But you are mistaken. I am not Tchaikovsky.’ And he continued on his way.

Wherever he went, Tchaikovsky had a genius for spending money, and there’s no doubt at all that Madame von Meck’s financial support had in some ways corrupted him. He took too much for granted, and he knew it.

> ‘From Mme von Meck I have received letters and an invitation to come to her estate at Brailovo, but not so much as a mention of any unusual payments. Meanwhile, I am filled with horror when I remember my debts and realise that until October I shall not have a kopeck. Oh how spoiled I have become! And how remiss in appreciating all that I owe to that wonderful woman.’

But it seems he could hardly help himself. Let him loose in, say, Paris, and thoughts of ‘that wonderful woman’ were powerless against his spendthrift nature. In that way he was no different from the man about town in his early Moscow days.

> ‘Oh how you’d laugh if you could see me here! I stroll the streets in a new grey overcoat and the most elegant of top hats, flaunting a silk plastron with a coral pin at my neck, and lilac gloves on my hands. Passing by the mirrored piers on the rue de la Paix or the boulevards, I invariably stop to admire myself, and I eye the reflection of my elegant person in all the shop windows. In general, I’ve been overcome at present (as has happened before) by a mania of coquetry. I’ve had a new suit of clothes made, and I’ve ordered a dozen shirts. The money flies, and in a few days I won’t have a single franc in my pocket.’

In the meantime. Antonina tormented him by alternately accepting and refusing a divorce, and at one stage she made his life intolerable by moving into the flat above his own.

She also began to show signs of a mental imbalance greater than her husband’s, becoming increasingly paranoid. For long stretches she would leave him alone, and then

suddenly break her welcome silence with letters, out of the blue, which drove him to the brink of another emotional collapse.

> 'I do not want to be even nominally the wife of a man who so basely slanders a woman who has done him no harm, Why did you not start with yourself, and tell of your own terrible vice, before judging me? After all this, you stress in your letters your kindness and generosity. But where are these qualities and how are they confirmed? Please do not trouble to answer me. Everything is finished between us, and therefore I ask you, dear sir, not to indulge in any lengthy correspondence but to deal only with this matter. But once again I repeat that I shall sign no filthy and untrue papers.'

By this time, her letters were badly unsettling Tchaikovsky before they were even opened.

> 'There is in this person, even in her handwriting, some poison that has a devastating effect on me! At the mere sight of the address written in her hand, I at once begin to feel sick, not only morally but physically as well.'

She continued to erupt, unpredictably, into Tchaikovsky's life, and the idea of divorce was eventually abandoned on both sides. It was eventually discovered that she'd given birth to an illegitimate child, which gave Tchaikovsky all the grounds he needed to divorce her, but by this time he was too weary to pursue the matter. Well, no, there was more to it than that. He was also desperately worried that his homosexuality might become public knowledge if the case ever came to court. As it happened, Antonina, after having a whole string of illegitimate children, whom she deposited in a foundling's home, spent the last twenty years of her life in a mental hospital.

But a Tchaikovsky not in emotional turmoil (at least in prospect) would hardly have been Tchaikovsky at all. The next crisis to envelop him concerned the drafting into the Russian army of his long-standing personal servant, Alyosha Sofronov. And no-one close to him could doubt that this was very much more for Tchaikovsky than just the loss (and the temporary loss, at that) of a servant. It was an event that almost triggered another nervous breakdown, and it had a serious effect on Tchaikovsky's creative life. In fact, the crisis began even before it was certain that Alyosha would actually be drafted. The decision was to be made on the basis, of a drawing of lots, and all those whose names were in the hat, so to speak, had been summoned to attend the procedure in Moscow. Even before Alyosha's departure, though, Tchaikovsky confided to Mme von Meck…

> 'I am living on tenterhooks. Alyosha leaves tomorrow or the day after, and parting with him will not be easy for me. It is difficult to lose (perhaps for a long time) someone to whom you are tied by ten years' living together. I feel sorry for myself, but mostly I pity him. He will have to go through a great deal of suffering before he becomes accustomed to his new situation. To suppress my sad feelings I have been working intensely.'

Which at the moment he was still able to do. But hardly had Alyosha departed for Moscow than Tchaikovsky found it hard to think of anything else.

> ‘O my dear, my beloved Alyosha! As if by design, I have felt dreadfully unwell ever since you left. How much easier all this would be for me to bear if you were here with me! Know that whatever happens, whether or not you go into the army, you will always be mine and I shall never forget you, not for one moment. If you are indeed fated to go into the army, then I shall count the days impatiently, awaiting your return to me. I kiss you warmly and embrace you heartily and tenderly.’

Alyosha drew the short straw, as it were, and Tchaikovsky almost crumpled. Some days later he reported to Modyest...

> ‘Alyosha has been drafted. I am managing to live tolerably only because I am always drinking. If it weren’t for continual dinners and suppers with drink I think I should literally go mad.’

And some might say he almost did. He sought out Alyosha in his barracks, where he was predictably miserable, arranged to be in Moscow as often as he could, expressly for the purpose of being with Alyosha as much as possible, demeaning himself in attempts to win favours for his ‘little soldier’, as he called him, ‘weeping much’, as he confessed to Modyest and Madame von Meck, and becoming, apparently, quite impervious to the increasing adulation in which he was held by the public at large and the musical establishment in particular. He continued, sporadically, to drink himself drunk in order to dull the pain of his separation from Alyosha, whether in Russia or in Europe. And time brought little comfort. Long after Alyosha’s induction, Tchaikovsky wrote to him,

> ‘Every evening, when I have undressed, I sit at my desk and start to grieve and to pine, remembering that you are not beside me. Absurd to say, I even weep a little every time I see anything that reminds me of you. No-one will ever replace you. I embrace you most heartily, my dear Alyosha.’

And new misfortunes, or the threat of them, began to crowd in on him. The death of Nikolai Rubinstein at the age of forty-six shook him deeply. It seems also to have shaken him, if only briefly, out of the creative lethargy that had overtaken him. Almost the only work he managed to produce that year was an immensely long piano trio which he intended as an instrumental requiem for Rubinstein.

10 Piano Trio, Op. 50 (opening)

11 At around the same time as he was writing that trio, rumours reached Tchaikovsky that Madame von Meck had suffered a severe financial crisis and was selling some of her several properties in an attempt to stem the tide of impending bankruptcy. Tchaikovsky was appalled, and wrote to her,

> ‘My freedom and the materially luxurious existence that I lead are priceless blessings. But they would at once become burdensome to me if I were to learn that I enjoy them to the detriment of too tactful and generous a friend. Speaking without any exaggeration, I feel I owe you my life. And so, my dear friend, for God’s sake, do not hide the truth from me. I desire first and foremost your own

> well-being. Any pleasure is poisoned for me if it does damage to your interests. If indeed you are obliged to reduce your expenses, then let me also change my way of life and take a place again in one of the conservatories, where they will welcome me joyfully.'

But the lady would have none of it.

> 'Why put on again that heavy yoke? Your nerves and health are only just beginning to settle down, to grow stronger, and now again all will be ruined and lost. I shall not give up my right to take care of you, nor have you the right to take it from me.'

'Until such time,' she added, perhaps a little ominously,

> 'Until such time as I am no longer able to enjoy it.'

In the meantime, Tchaikovsky himself should have found considerable joy in the news that his eighteen-year-old niece Vera was engaged to be married. Her fiancé was a young naval officer whose name, by pure coincidence, happened to be Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov – exactly the same as the famous composer (but apparently they weren't even related).

On a visit to the family home at Kamenka, where he often stayed, Tchaikovsky met the happy couple, but as he reported to Modyest, the pleasure, on his part, was distinctly bittersweet.

> 'How much in love the young man is! Just as I used to be. He devours dear Vera with his eyes, is angry and anguished as soon as she leaves him for a moment. But one can see that this is not merely infatuation, but genuine normal love. Oh, Modya, what poor devils we are, you and I – why we shall live out our whole lives without ever for a single second experiencing the full, true happiness of love.'

And the reflection made him sadder still.

But at least he recovered the will to work, if not the joy of it. For more than a year, the creative flame had seemed to desert him. He busied himself, instead, with a commission from his publisher, editing the church music of Bortnyansky, which, to use his own word, he 'loathed'. In December, however, he reported to Madame von Meck that he had begun work on a new opera, *Mazeppa*. But that was about it. 'I work conscientiously,' he wrote,

> '...yes, but without enthusiasm, without even one twentieth of the inspiration and love for my nascent creation that I have experienced previously.'

But Madame von Meck had more pressing concerns. With characteristic shrewdness – and toughness – she had contrived to reverse the decline in her financial fortunes, and to regain much of her lost wealth. Her health, though, was failing and she'd recently developed acute pains in her right hand which left her unable to scrawl more than a few lines at a time. And as she reported to Tchaikovsky, the doctors could do nothing.

> ‘No remedies help. None. And my condition grows ever worse. The most bitter thing for me in this situation is the thought that I will be deprived of the possibility of conversing with you, my dear, my only friend. With you I have unburdened my heart, rested, recompensed myself for much of the grief I have had in life, and to lose this sole consolation is very painful and galling to me.’

Inevitably, their correspondence slowed. And not only on her side. Tchaikovsky, without the stimulus of her letters to answer, slowed from an average of one every other day (sometimes even one a day), to once a week, once every ten days, once a month. In time, especially when he was particularly busy, several months might now go by without a letter to her – though he continued to write more or less regularly to his family. Nor was this the only change in his way of life.

His desire for a new and stable home of his own had been growing for some years. For two decades now, he’d moved from pillar to post, either renting a place, or staying in hotels, or, more often, staying with members of his family – and relying on them to look after him. Now in his mid-forties, he was developing a conscience. But for all his natural generosity of spirit, he remained, like most creators, essentially self-centred.

> ‘I begin to realise that I am too old to go on being a sponger. I have reached the point where all last evening I sulked, selfishly, because chicken was served for dinner and some other dish was cancelled and replaced by yogurt. And there have been a thousand other trifles besides, revealing a sponging nature in me, which can become utterly unbearable if I do not settle down in my own place.’

So he now began to do something about it. But in stages. From now to the end of his life he would live within the boundaries of a single district in the countryside, though even here he couldn’t find the necessary solace in a single house. He still had a sequence of dwellings, but in each one he preserved exactly the same arrangement of furniture, fittings and contents in every room, exactly the same placement of paintings and photographs on the walls. And they were all his own. The first house he took was outside the village of Maidanovo, near the city of Klin, and it was here that he mapped out a daily routine from which he almost never varied, except when he was abroad. As the daughter of a close friend recalled,

> ‘He rose between seven and eight, and bathed in the river that flowed right past the house (and the bathing was excellent). After his morning tea he devoted some time either to studying English or to serious reading. This was followed by the first of his daily walks, this one lasting no more than three quarters of an hour. From half past nine until one he worked. At one o’clock precisely, he had lunch, after which, whatever the weather, he went for another walk. He had read somewhere that two hours of walking a day were essential to one’s health, and he observed this rule religiously. Solitude during these walks was essential, for he spent most of the time composing in his head. By four o’clock he returned home for afternoon tea. At this time he would read through the papers or converse with his guests, if he had any. From five until seven he worked at his desk. Then before supper, in summer, he took yet a third walk, this time, very often, in the company of friends, while in autumn or winter he usually played the piano, alone – or in duets, if he had musicians visiting. And after supper, until eleven, a game of cards, some reading, or writing letters, of which there were always very many.’

He corresponded regularly in four or five languages, and while he often failed to return a book or an object that he'd borrowed, he almost never left a letter unanswered.

The first work he composed in his new home was a piece he'd been considering for some time – a programmatic symphony based on Byron's poetic drama *Manfred.*

> 'I knew that it would require an enormous amount of energy and concentration, because it was a very serious and complex undertaking. And once I had started on the work, and it had caught my enthusiasm, it was quite beyond my powers to put it aside. But it meant a summer of almost continuous melancholy and nervous strain, since the subject is a very depressing one. Never before have I put so much effort into a piece – and never have I been so exhausted by it.'

12 **'Manfred' Symphony, Op. 58**

13 Part of the 'Manfred' Symphony of 1885.

As soon as he'd finished work on that, Tchaikovsky returned to an opera, *The Sorceress*, which had been effectively side-lined by the 'Manfred' Symphony. In May of 1886, after an exceptionally long time at home, he revisited Paris and spent a happy month in Tbilisi with his brother Anatoly. By the end of June he was back home at Maidanovo, where he finished *The Sorceress* – except for the orchestration, which, unusually, took him another nine months. In January 1887, and then again in March, he conducted concerts of his own works in Russia, and their success finally persuaded him to accept long-standing invitations to conduct similar concerts abroad. After the first four performances of *The Sorceress*, which to his very great disappointment was not a success, he departed for Europe on his first-ever conducting tour outside Russia. He appeared, and was rapturously received, in Leipzig, Hamburg, Berlin, Prague, Paris and London. And it was on this tour that he first met Brahms. Given his dislike of Brahms's music, he was pleasantly surprised by the man himself, as he reported in a letter to his publisher:

> 'I've been on the booze with Brahms. He's very nice, and not at all proud, as I'd imagined, but remarkably straightforward and without the faintest trace of arrogance. He has a very cheerful disposition and the hours I spent in his company have left me with nothing but the most pleasant memories.'

Another memorable meeting on this tour was Tchaikovsky's brief reunion with Désirée Artôt, the singer, remember, with whom he'd once fancied himself in love, and even contemplated marriage. And what might that have been like? But it was a tour of many memorable meetings, with Dvorak, Grieg (whom he liked enormously), and also with Gounod and Massenet.

When he got back to Russia in April, after four months abroad, he moved out of Maidanovo, into another house, this one at Frolovskoye, in the same general area. And it seemed to him, at least for now, to be a corner of Heaven itself.

‘ Ah, how pleasant and free it is here! The sun has already set and in the broad meadow in front of the main entrance the scorching heat of the day has given way to the cool of the evening. The air bears the scent of lilac and of the hay that they have been cutting somewhere. The may-bugs break the silence with a bass note, the nightingales sang, and a song came from far away. Before I went to bed I sat for a long time in front of the open window, breathing in the marvellous, fresh air, listening to all the sounds of a spring night, the charms of which could not be spoilt even by the angry croaking of the frogs.’

And for a while, though he did start work on his Fifth Symphony, music yielded to nature. Throughout his life, Tchaikovsky’s love of the countryside was one of the surest antidotes to his recurrent depressions. And though he tried to stick to the daily plan mapped out in Maidanovo, his new surroundings forced, at least to begin with, a rather different pace, with its own internal rhythms.

‘My life here has already assumed a steady, regular course. After coffee in the morning I go for a walk in the garden and when I have been right round I go through some little wooden gates, go on across a ditch and then, not far in front of me, there opens out a garden which has run wild and has turned into a delightful, quiet, cosy little spot; it is populated by every kind of avian inhabitant and the call of the oriole and the trilling of the nightingale stand out as the most attractive sounds. In places the paths have grown over so thickly, and the greenery is so fresh and clean that you could imagine you were in the depths of a forest. I first go for a walk here and then I sit down somewhere in heavy shade and spend about an hour like that. There is nothing to compare with these moments of isolation, surrounded by greenery and flowers, when you sit listening and observing that organic life which, though it may manifest itself silently, noiselessly, yet speaks louder of infinity in time and space than the rumble of the roads and all the bustle of town life. When I have been abroad, amongst all the striking and luxuriant beauties which nature provides in the south, I have never experienced these moments of holy rapture in the contemplation of nature which are higher even than the delights of art. I like open places at sunset and the meadow, in front of the house, with trees, lilac bushes, and the stream at its edge, makes a charming evening walk. What a marvellous life this is!’

The countryside was extraordinarily liberating for Tchaikovsky. Here the child in him, which was never very far away, could play and explore without constraint.

‘I have found a considerable quantity of mushrooms, which are one of my greatest pleasures in the summer. All night I dreamt of enormous, fat, red mushrooms. When I woke up it struck me that these mushroomy dreams were very childish. And indeed, when one lives alone with nature, one does develop a childlike receptivity to the simplest, most guileless joys which it offers. Yesterday, for instance, it gave me the greatest delight to spend it must have been about an hour by the path in the garden watching how a snail got in amongst a tiny bunch of ants. Even when living entirely on one’s own, I do not understand how anybody could be bored in the country for a single moment. Surely there is more interest in that little scene, which shows in microscopic form the whole tragedy of the conflict amongst so many individuals, than in the vacuous chatter, the pathetic and pointless flapping about which is the essence of how most of society spends its time.’

Still, it would be wrong to suggest that Tchaikovsky was happy only in the countryside. Even in the aftermath of his marriage crisis, he was able to feel real joy in the cities of Italy, Switzerland and France.

> 'I do not remember ever in my life having such a marvellous spell of happiness and well-being as I have had on this trip abroad. Living in Florence, in Switzerland, where I got on extraordinarily well with my work, my arrival in Paris has just been one happy, placid, carefree moment after another. I am often seriously frightened that I will get used to it, will get hardened to it, and will come to take for granted the limitless blessings I am now enjoying.'

As with the 'Manfred' Symphony and *The Sorceress*, once again Tchaikovsky allowed works to overlap in his mind, and on his writing desk. Before he finished the Fifth Symphony, he'd already begun working on his 'fantasy-overture' *Hamlet*. Nevertheless, the symphony was finished in plenty of time for its long-awaited first performance, which Tchaikovsky conducted in St. Petersburg that November.

14 Symphony No. 5 in E minor, Op. 64 (Mvt 1)

15 After unveiling the Fifth Symphony in Russia, Tchaikovsky travelled to Prague, to unveil it there, where it was very warmly received. Back home in time for Christmas, he began work on a new ballet, *The Sleeping Beauty*. Many people regard it as his greatest, and it seems to have come to him relatively easily. In any case he'd completed the Prologue and the first two acts by the end of January, and most of the third act came to him during the course of yet another European tour, this one embracing Cologne, Frankfurt, Dresden and Berlin, in Germany, Geneva in Switzerland, and once again, Paris and London. When he got home, the ballet was basically finished – all but the orchestration, which actually gave him a lot of trouble, rather to his surprise. He didn't finish it till the end of the summer, and it didn't go into production until January of the next year, when it was well but not rapturously received.

As was becoming usual after an important premiere, Tchaikovsky quickly left Russia, this time headed for Italy. In Florence he set to work at once on a new stage work: *The Queen of Spades* – another opera, based on Pushkin's dark, even ghoulish story of the same name. Six weeks later it was fully sketched, and six weeks after that, it was finished. It's characteristic of Tchaikovsky's emotional involvement with his characters that he was in tears while composing the tragic last scene. It's also typical that he followed the opera with a work that was its almost exact opposite: an elegant, undemanding and charmingly sophisticated work for strings to which he gave the surprisingly inappropriate French title – *Souvenir de Florence*:

16 Souvenir de Florence

CD 4

1 Tchaikovsky's most substantial souvenir of Florence was the opera he'd written there. And unlike most of his others, *The Queen of Spades* scored a hit from its first performance onwards.

When he began his next important work, in the autumn of 1890, Tchaikovsky had little inkling of the emotional bombshell that was about to explode in his inner life. On the 6th of October, while staying with Anatoly in Tbilisi, he received a letter from Madame von Meck, announcing that she had in fact gone bankrupt and that Tchaikovsky's allowance was therefore at an end. He was thunderstruck. Not because of the money, but because of the letter's implications. His first response, though – to her at any rate – was sympathetic, concerned, and generous:

> 'My very dear friend! Your news in the letter which I have just received profoundly grieved me, not for myself but for you. Those are no empty words. It would, of course, be untrue to say that such a radical curtailment of my budget will have no effect on my material prosperity. But it will affect it very much less than you probably think. The point is that my income has increased substantially in recent years and there is no reason to suppose that it will not go on increasing at a rapid rate. So if I occupy even the smallest place amidst your innumerable worries then I beg you, for goodness sake, to rest assured that I was not in the slightest, even momentarily, distressed at the thought of the material deprivation which faces me. Please believe that this is the plain truth: I am no good at striking poses and thinking up fine words. So the point is not that I will have to reduce my expenses for a time. The point is that you, with all that you have got, with your grand style of life, are going to have to suffer deprivations. I cannot tell you how terribly sorry I feel for you.
>
> I was rather offended by the words of your letter but I don't think that you can really have meant what you said. Do you seriously believe that I would think about you only while I was having the benefit of your money? Could I forget for a single moment all that you have done for me and how much I owe you? That I would certainly have gone out of my mind and perished if you had not come to my aid and supported with your friendship, your concern, and your financial assistance (my sheet-anchor at that time) my desperately flagging energies and the drive to go further along my chosen path. No, my dear friend, rest assured that I will remember that until I draw my last breath and will bless you for it. I am glad that it is now, when you are no longer able to share your resources with me, that I can tell you with all the force at my command of my boundless, ardent gratitude which it is quite impossible to put into words. You probably do not even suspect yourself the full extent of your kindness. It would not otherwise have occurred to you, now that you are poor, that I would think of you sometimes!!! I can say without any exaggeration that I have never forgotten you and never will forget you even for a single moment, because when I think about myself my thoughts always and inevitably lead me to you.'

What so deeply hurt Tchaikovsky wasn't the end of his allowance, but the fact that Madame von Meck was clearly terminating their correspondence, and hence their friendship, at the same time. She was ill and weak, as he knew, and had lost the use of one hand. But the reasons she gave for ending his annuity were simply not true. Her financial problems were both slight and temporary, as she knew, and the fact is that she remained a very rich woman indeed. But even that wasn't the essence of Tchaikovsky's distress. A letter to his publisher is far less noble than his response to her.

> ‘The fact is that I am very, very, very offended; and offended is the word. My relations with Mme von Meck were such that I was never embarrassed by her generous hand-outs. Now I am embarrassed in retrospect; it is an insult to my pride. My belief that there was no limit to her willingness to support me financially, and to make any sacrifice for me, has been betrayed. What I would like now is that she should be so definitively ruined that she needed my help. The whole business, in short, has turned out to be a sordid, stupid affair which just makes me feel sick and ashamed.
>
> What distresses and troubles me most is not the fact that she doesn’t write but that she has completely stopped taking any interest in me. I wanted, I needed my relations with her to continue quite unchanged after I stopped receiving money from her. Unfortunately this has proved impossible because it’s perfectly obvious that she has turned cool towards me. The consequence is that I have stopped writing to her, and have cut off practically all relations with her since I have been deprived of her money. Such a situation humiliates me in my own estimation and constantly torments and burdens me beyond all measure; it also makes it insufferable for me to recollect how I used to accept her payments. I have been reading and rereading her old letters. One would not have thought that her illness, or her misfortunes, or her financial problems could have changed the feelings which were expressed in those letters. And yet they did change. Perhaps it is precisely because I never knew her personally that she seemed to me to be the ideal of a human being; I could not have imagined inconstancy in such a demigoddess; I would have thought that the world would fall apart before she would ever change in her attitude to me. But this is what has happened and it turns upside down my view of people and my faith in the best of them; it disturbs my peace of mind and ruins that portion of happiness which fate has allotted to me. Without, of course, meaning to do so, Nadezhda Filaretovna has treated me very cruelly. The worst of all is that because her health is in such a bad way I am frightened of distressing and upsetting her, and cannot, therefore, tell her all that is tormenting me. I cannot even express to her my feelings, which in itself would be a relief.’

Whatever the explanation – and it’s likely to be sheer coincidence – Tchaikovsky’s career went from strength to strength from the time of Madame von Meck’s letter. Revered and adored in every country where European music was heard, almost a pop idol wherever he conducted, he should have felt on top of the world. But Madame von Meck had blown a hole in his life too big to heal. Apart from the bitterness which he could never manage to exorcise, a deep sense of loneliness and betrayal filled many if not most of his waking hours. And an abiding sense of grief. He had lost – she had taken from him – the only friend to whom he could unburden himself without any restraint or fear. The friend whom he had trusted more completely than any other, had cast him off, and try as he might he could never interpret her letter in a way that made sense. He could have coped more easily with her death. That, at least, he could understand. Death comes to us all. And nobody needed to explain that to Tchaikovsky. In his day you couldn’t reach the age of fifty without having confronted the deaths of others several, more likely many times over. Grief was a part of the landscape. And given time, you got over it. But this was different. Madame von Meck was still very much alive. But the Madame von Meck who had needed him, who herself had needs that only he could satisfy, clearly needed him no longer. There can’t be any shadow of a doubt that she knew the effect her letter would have on him. Was it, then, an act of

wanton cruelty? Or did she feel that he would be better able to bear the ending of their friendship if she made him hate her? That anger was cleaner than grief? The fact is, nobody knows. What we do know is that she didn't long outlive him. And that she was not the Muse without whom he could no longer compose. In that role, her successor was already in place.

2 Symphony No. 6 in B minor, Op. 74 (Mvt 2)

> 'My darling Bob,
> When I am abroad, I suffer a terrible, inexpressible, maddeningly agonising homesickness. But most of all, of course, I think of you, and long to see you, and to hear your voice. I feel sometimes that I would give up ten years of my life (and as you know, I value my life very much), if you could appear before me even for a second. Oh Bob, I do adore you. And you remember that I told you that even greater than my joy at beholding you with my own eyes is my suffering when I am without you!'

3 That unique waltz in 5/4 time was dedicated to Tchaikovsky's young nephew Vladimir Davydov (nicknamed 'Bob'). The boy had been the apple of Tchaikovsky's eye since early childhood, and as he entered his teens he was fast becoming the single greatest source of pleasure and consolation in Tchaikovsky's day-to-day life. In 1884, when Bob was thirteen, Tchaikovsky, now forty-four, wrote to Modyest in ebullient mood.

> 'Ah! Our friendship is terrific! And do you know, for the first time he displays a strong liking for me. Formerly he only allowed himself to be adored, while now he seems to have begun to value my adoration. And truly, I do adore him – and the longer, the more powerfully. What a delightful specimen of humankind he is!'

But it's in his diaries rather than his correspondence that we learn most about the full extent of Tchaikovsky's adoration.

> 'May the 1st, 1884: Before supper played piano duets with my darling, incomparable, wonderful, ideal Bob! In the end he will simply drive me mad with his indescribable charm. ... As soon as I am not working, I start longing for Bob and missing him. I do love him terribly. O Lord I do!'

Fully eight years later, Tchaikovsky's love for his nephew, now twenty-one, had become something like an obsession. All of which must have been hard going for Bob, who didn't reciprocate Tchaikovsky's feelings – something which Tchaikovsky himself seems not to have understood until the last year of his life.

In December of 1890 Tchaikovsky's latest opera, *The Queen of Spades* scored a tremendous hit when it was first produced, in St. Petersburg, leading quickly to a double commission from the Imperial Theatre there for one ballet and a one-act opera. But before he could complete either, Tchaikovsky crossed the Atlantic for the first time to make his conducting debut in the United States, followed by a brief tour which took in

New York, Philadelphia and Baltimore, and included trips to Washington DC and, most unforgettably, to Niagara Falls. His state of mind as he set off was low even by his standards, and was deepened still further by the death of his sister Alexandra, which he discovered on the last page of a newspaper on the very brink of his departure.

> 'I rushed out of the room as though I had been stung. After wandering the streets without any sense of the time, I went round to see Sophie Menter and Vasya Sapelnikov. It was my great good fortune that they were in. I spent the night at their place. At first I thought it was my duty to abandon America and go to Petersburg, but then I realised that that was pointless. But my mental sufferings are very great. I fear dreadfully for Bob, though I know from experience that at his age such misfortunes are born comparatively lightly.'

After a crossing which cured him of the idea that he wasn't susceptible to seasickness, he arrived in New World, and found that it surpassed his highest expectations.

> 'New York, American customs, American hospitality, the very appearance of the town, the remarkable comfort of my accommodation – all this is very much to my taste and if I were younger I would probably be greatly enjoying my stay in this interesting new country. But I am enduring all this, as though it were a mild form of punishment, which the agreeable circumstances make less rigorous. My thoughts and aspirations are as one: home, home, home!!! People here could not be kinder, they honour me, they entertain me. It seems that I am ten times better known in America than I am in Europe. When they first told me that, I thought it was exaggerated kindness, but now I can see that it's true. There are some pieces of mine which they still don't know in Moscow; here they play them several times in a season and write whole articles and commentaries about them (Hamlet, for instance). They have played the Fifth Symphony two years running. Isn't this funny!!! At the rehearsals the players gave me a very enthusiastic reception. And they played superbly.'

4 **Symphony No. 5 in E minor, Op. 64 (Mvt 4)**

5 'The great generosity of these Americans has made a terrific impression on me. American life, their customs, their ways – I find all this extraordinarily interesting and novel; and at every turn one comes upon things which are staggering in their colossal dimensions, certainly by comparison with anything found in Europe. The place is positively bubbling over with life, and though the main interest is profit the Americans are also very attentive to art. Proof of this is the huge hall which they have just built and the opening of which was the cause of my being invited here. This building cost millions and it was paid for by music-lovers. These wealthy enthusiasts maintain a permanent orchestra. We have nothing like this! I must admit that the scale and impressiveness of all that the Americans undertake is tremendously attractive. I also like the comfort about which they take so much trouble. My room, just like every other room in all the hotels, has gas and electric light and a private bathroom and lavatory, there is heaps of extremely comfortable furniture; there is an apparatus for speaking to the reception desk and all sorts of things to make one comfortable which do not exist in Europe. In short, there is a great deal about the country which I like very much and find remarkably interesting.'

But as so often, he found the price of celebrity too high for comfort, and his old misanthropic side surfaced as expected.

> 'My only pleasant hours or rather minutes are when I am alone in my room in the evening and have the prospect night and morning, guaranteed against visits. The rest of the time, I feel perpetually tired, as if I had just walked about 25 miles. They tell me that this is the effect that the spring air has on people here. Secondly, I am suffering more than ever from the society of strangers, and all the more so because I have to speak in German and sometimes even in English!'

But he had to admit that there were some unexpectedly pleasant times too.

> 'I spent the whole day yesterday at the house of the local music publisher, Schirmer. At first I found it hard and was suffering, but towards evening, when there was a circle of extraordinarily kind and affectionate people, I suddenly felt at ease and happy again. In general, I cannot praise the people here enough, and their friendliness towards me is extraordinary. They are even too kind, and it's too difficult for me to arrange an hour to myself. I like New York more and more. Incidentally, Central Park is magnificent. It is remarkable that people of my generation can remember very well when it was nothing but cows grazing in fields.
> I have rehearsals almost every day, but on May 28 1 am going to visit the Niagara Falls, and on the 3rd I shall be conducting in Philadelphia; the 6th in Baltimore and on the 9th – at last! I leave. The weather is marvellous, but too hot. All the trees have long since come out.'

Among the American institutions he found it difficult to enjoy, however, was the New York press.

> '"Tchaikovsky is a tall, gray well built, interesting man, well on to sixty. He seems a trifle embarrassed, and responds to the applause by a succession of brusque and jerky bows. But as soon as he grasps the baton his self-confidence returns." That's what I read this morning in the New York Herald. It annoys me when they write about me personally, not just about the music. I cannot bear it when they remark on my embarrassment and are surprised at my "short, sharp" bows.'

What he could bear was the verdict of the same article a little further on:

> 'There is no sign of nervousness about him as he taps for silence. He conducts with the authoritative strength of a master and the band obeys his lead as one man.'

The next day was his birthday. And although the paper's description of him as being 'well on to sixty' was wide of the mark, it seems it was an understandable mistake.

> 'In his later years, Pyotr Ilich aged quite drastically; his thin hair turned completely white, his face became covered with wrinkles, he began to lose his teeth, which he found especially unpleasant since it sometimes hindered him from talking with complete clarity. Still more perceptible was the gradual weakening of his eyesight which made reading in the evenings by the fire

difficult, and this deprived him of his chief diversion within the creative life he pursued in the country.'

But today he was not in the country, and not at home. And truth to tell, he had had happier birthdays.

'Today I am fifty-one. And just at this moment I am feeling terribly agitated. There's a concert at two o'clock with the Third Suite. This peculiar feeling is an astonishing thing. How many times have I conducted this selfsame suite? It goes perfectly well; what is there to be frightened of? And yet I suffer intolerably. I don't think I have ever been in such a panic. Is it because they pay attention to my appearance here and my shyness makes itself apparent?'

Not likely. The only rational explanation of stage fright is fear of criticism, of not being approved of. And of being so exposed. If it had been possible or acceptable to lower a curtain between Tchaikovsky and the audience, the chances are that his nerves would have been dramatically diminished, if not banished altogether.

In any case, the concert was a roaring success, and Tchaikovsky was treated like visiting royalty.

'Once again, I was given a supper reception and created, as they say in today's papers, "a sensation". I am having great difficulty in finding time to write letters. When I have a spare minute in the morning I write my diary. Today my activities in New York come to an end. And throughout, the press have sung my praises to an extent that I never would have contemplated in Russia. In the intervals and after the concert the ladies would gather together in a great crowd to look at me and some of them would come up and give expression to their enthusiasm. They have all been terribly kind to me. Time is beginning to pass quickly and in ten days I am hoping to depart for home. Today and tomorrow will be difficult days, i.e. not one minute of freedom: but on the other hand on Monday I go alone to Niagara. After that I have to go to so many towns, one after the other, that I hope my day of departure will creep up unnoticed.'

But wherever he went, his reception was the same.

'I am besieged by visitors: reporters, composers, librettists, and, above all, absolute mountains of letters from all corners of America asking for my autograph. To all of which I reply conscientiously.'

Among the apparently endless stream of visitors were two Russian ladies – the first compatriots he'd encountered since his arrival. His reaction was unexpectedly intense.

'Since this was my first chance to have a heart-to-heart talk in Russian, there was a scene: tears suddenly came to my eyes, my voice quavered, and I could not restrain my sobbing. I rushed into another room and did not emerge for some time. I burn with shame when I think about this surprising episode.'

But it was not to recur.

Of the multitude of celebrities, political big-wigs and captains of industry whom Tchaikovsky met in America, none made quite such an impression as Andrew Carnegie, whose money helped to build the now famous concert hall named after him, in fact the very hall Tchaikovsky was there to open.

> 'An amazing eccentric, who from being a telegraph boy, was transformed with the passing of the years into one of America's richest men. But he has remained a simple, modest man who does not at all turn his nose up at anyone. He inspired in me an unusual warmth of feeling. Throughout the whole evening he displayed his liking for me in a remarkably individual way. He grasped me by the hand, crying out that I was uncrowned, but the most genuine king of music, embraced me (without kissing: here men never kiss each other), and in describing my greatness, stood on tiptoe and raised his arms above his head, and finally delighted the whole company by imitating me conducting. He did this so seriously and so well, so like me that I myself was delighted. His wife, a remarkably simple and sweet young woman, also expressed her kindly feelings towards me in a hundred different ways. All this was very gratifying for me but at the same time made me feel slightly ashamed.'

6 The day after his dinner with Carnegie, Tchaikovsky set off, in a state of high excitement, for Niagara and it's awe-inspiring falls. Part of his excitement was the prospect of seeing (and hearing) the falls themselves, part of it, too, was the fact that for the first time since his arrival in the States he was by himself.

> 'I boarded the train in the drawing room car. It is like our Pullman car only the easy chairs are placed closer to one another and with backs to the windows, but in such a way that it is possible to turn in all directions. The windows are large and the view on both sides is completely unobstructed. Next to this car was the dining car, while several cars away was the smoking car with a buffet. The connection from car to car is quite easy, much more convenient than with us, since the passage-ways are covered. The employees, i.e. the conductors, the waiters in the dining car and in the buffet in the smoking car, are Negroes who are very obliging and polite. At twelve o'clock I lunched (the price of the lunch is one dollar) from a menu giving one any choice of food from among all of the dishes indicated. Dined at six, and again in exactly the same way, that is, from a score or two of dishes I could select whatever and as much as I desired, and again for one dollar. The cars are much more luxurious than ours, despite the absence of classes. The luxuries are entirely superfluous even, as, for example, the frescoes, the crystal ornamentations, etc. There are numerous dressing rooms, i.e. compartments, in which are the washstands with hot and cold water, towels (regarding towels, there is an amazing supply here, in general), cakes of soap, brushes, etc. You can roam about the train and wash as much as you like. There is a bath and a barber shop. All this is convenient and comfortable – but, for all that, our cars nevertheless are more attractive to me for some reason. But probably that is a reflection of my longing for home, which oppressed and gnawed at me madly again all day yesterday. We arrived in Buffalo at eight-thirty o'clock. Here two gentlemen were waiting for me whom Mayer asked to show me from one train to the other, as it is rather difficult to orientate oneself in the labyrinths of this junction of various lines. One of them is a Polish pianist. The meeting with these gentlemen lasted but ten minutes. Fifty minutes after leaving Buffalo, I was in Niagara Falls.'

But after his journey he was in no mood to explore it just yet.

> 'I felt unusually tired, I think because it was awfully stuffy in the train, for Americans and especially American women are afraid of draughts, as a result of which the windows are closed all the time and there is no passage for the outside air.'

No such complaint could be made about the hotel at which he was staying, though, and the next morning he awoke refreshed and eager, and shortly after breakfast set out to see the wonders of the falls at first hand.

> 'The beauty and the grandeur of this sight are truly amazing. After we had visited and had a good look at the main Falls which is more or less divided into several separate falls, some of which are enormous (the second one especially), we set off to skirt round the island towards the Three Sisters Islands, This whole walk is charming, especially at this time of year. The greenery is absolutely fresh and dandelions (my darlings) are blooming amongst the grass. I had a terrible urge to pick some of these yellow beauties smelling of freshness but at every step you see a notice board with the reminder that you are not even allowed to pick wildflowers. Then I looked at the main waterfall, Horse Shoe Fall. It is an awe-inspiring sight, which renders one quite speechless.'

Following his return to New York, he had two more conducting engagements, one in Philadelphia, the other in Baltimore, and then, on the 9th of June he began the long journey home.

On his return to Frolovskoye in May he was greeted by a sight that appalled him: the beloved woods surrounding his house had been cut down. Fortunately, he still had his other house at Maidanovo, and there he was able to get back to work on his one-act opera and the new ballet. The opera, *Iolanta*, was not very well received, but the ballet, based on a story by E.T.A. Hoffmann, provided him with what may well be, even today, his most popular orchestral work, the so-called *Nutcracker Suite*.

Rumour has it that this, or the original ballet anyway, was the first work by a major composer to include the newly invented celeste, or celesta, as it's also known. Well neither is true, actually. Tchaikovsky himself had used it in an earlier, though yes very recent work, and the instrument itself was actually invented almost seven years before that. But it's certainly never been more famously used than in the 'Dance of the Sugar-Plum Fairy.'

7 'Dance of the Sugar-Plum Fairy' from The Nutcracker

8 The reason Tchaikovsky put together the *Nutcracker* Suite at all was to replace a work he'd written around the time of Madame von Meck's bombshell and later destroyed, after a single performance. It was the so-called 'symphonic ballad' *Voyevoda* – nothing to do with his earlier opera of the same name. Well, I say destroyed, but that's not the whole story. What he destroyed was the actual orchestral score. What he didn't

destroy were the individual instrumental parts that every player had in front of him at that one performance. So, it was no great trick to reconstruct the work after his death – which is good, because the piece is good. More than good. It's one of his most interesting and substantial orchestral works, but even today, performances of it are relatively rare. Cheerful it certainly isn't. And it must owe some of its disturbing darkness to the effect of Madame von Meck's letter. The mere association of the two would have been enough to turn Tchaikovsky against it, but it wasn't just the association. He was also afraid that the work revealed him as a composer who was losing his powers. Well it didn't, and he wasn't.

9 Voyevoda (Symphonic Ballad)

10 What the *Voyevoda* does reveal – as the *Nutcracker* Suite doesn't – is an increasing gloom, a kind of pessimistic fatalism which had certainly surfaced before, in works like the Fourth Symphony, but which now began to look like taking centre-stage in Tchaikovsky's music generally. Certainly the gloom of the *Voyevoda* anticipates the even greater gloom of the Sixth Symphony, one of the most pessimistic pieces of music ever written. But none of this affected the enormous esteem in which Tchaikovsky was now held pretty well everywhere, or the tremendous affection in audiences and players alike. As a conductor, he'd come a very long way from the incompetent fledgling at the Conservatory – the one who'd held his chin to keep his head on. But there were other ways of losing it, which stayed with him. A choir member in St. Petersburg, remembered a particularly notable rehearsal near the end of Tchaikovsky's life:

> 'Tormented by the refractory elements in the choirs, Pyotr Ilich finally lost his self-control. He screamed at us and struck out so mercilessly with his baton that it finally broke and one end flew off into one of the choirs; but all these thunderings were permeated with such exceptional good nature, such immeasurable Russian mildness that you couldn't get angry with the conductor, the more so since his situation was in reality very difficult.'

How a violent rage can be permeated with good will and mildness is a little hard to understand, but there's no doubt that on this occasion Tchaikovsky was indeed in a difficult situation – and it wasn't only with the choir.

> 'The orchestra, being used to playing without a choir, became confused, and we were slow in entering after the soloists. Now the basses weren't there, now the tenors were missing, now the drum spoiled everything. But in the end, everything proceeded smoothly. At the final rehearsal we sang well, and at the concert better still. But it was all due to Tchaikovsky, who had taken such pains with us. His gentle simplicity, his good-natured scolding, and the whole tone in which he delivered both his reproofs and his encouragements won him the hearts of all who worked under him.'

But there were times, even in his own music, when he felt out of his depth. One, unique instance was a performance of *Eugene Onegin* which he was to have conducted in Hamburg.

> ‘They had learnt the work extremely well and the production was not at all bad, but there are changes in the recitatives because of the German text and I couldn’t help getting lost and muddling it. Despite all their attempts to persuade me, I have withdrawn from conducting it because I am frightened of ruining the whole thing. Especially since the regular conductor here isn’t just some middling character: he’s a positive genius, and dying to conduct the first performance. They call him Mahler.’

And why not? It was his name.

Tchaikovsky was now at the high noon of his international celebrity. In France he was elected a so-called ‘corresponding member’ of the Académie Française and in England he was given an honorary Doctorate by Cambridge University. It was on his way to accept these honours that he met, for the first time in more than forty years, his childhood governess Fanny Dürbach, who had been, remember, perhaps the most important influence on his creative development between the ages of four and eight. It was she, more than his parents, who fostered his intense relationship to music, and she who had encouraged him to write poetry.

> ‘Astonishingly, since she is over seventy now, she seems little changed. I was very much afraid there would be tears and a scene, but nothing of the sort transpired. She greeted me as though it was only a year since we’d seen each other – with joy, tenderness and great simplicity. She showed to me our childhood exercise books, some of my old letters, and most wonderfully dear letters of Mama. I seemed to breathe the air of our Votkinsk home and hear the voice of Mama and the others. She gave one wonderful letter from Mama to me, which of course I cherish.’

11 On his return to Russia, the newly decorated Tchaikovsky was welcomed and fussed over like a national hero, which in fact he’d been for some time. In Odessa alone, in addition to his professional commitments, he was subjected to almost two weeks of parties, and dinners and celebrations, which inevitably left him feeling exhausted.

> ‘I have never experienced the like of what is happening just now. They are honouring me here as though I were some great man, almost the saviour of the fatherland, and I am so pulled about in all directions that I can scarcely breathe. I have been here nearly two weeks now and in that time I have managed to conduct at five concerts, take innumerable rehearsals, and consume dozens of dinners and suppers given in my honour. It’s all very tiring but it would be ridiculous to complain because eventually I will be glad to look back on all the enthusiasm and incredible ovations. I have also supervised the rehearsals of The Queen of Spades and I attended the three performances. I must thank God for the health which I command and which enables me to survive this sort of life for a full two weeks. I have never received such praise anywhere. If only I might at some stage be given in Moscow or Petersburg even a fraction of what I was accorded in Odessa!’

It was on his way home from Odessa that he decided to go ahead with an idea for his next symphony which he’d mapped out some months earlier. It was to be what he described as a ‘Programme Symphony’. ‘The ultimate essence of the plan,’ he wrote...

> ‘The ultimate essence of the plan of the symphony is LIFE. First movement – all impulsive passion, confidence, thirst for activity. Must be short. (finale DEATH – result of collapse.) Second movement love, third disappointments; fourth ends dying away (also short).’

In fact he changed his mind several times and the plan of the actual symphony was quite different.

In the Spring of 1892, Tchaikovsky had bought yet another house, but this one, also near the town of Klin, was to remain his home for the rest of his life. And it was here that he composed virtually all of the Sixth Symphony. His work on it was almost obsessive, but he did find time for the odd letter.

> ‘I am full of my new composition at the moment, in fact I find it hard to tear myself away from it. I think it will be the best thing I’ve ever written. The programme behind it (which I shall never divulge) is so intensely personal that as I was mentally composing it on my travels I frequently wept, copiously. When I got back I settled to the sketches and I worked with such fervour and speed that in less than four days I had completely finished the first movement and already had a clear idea of the other movements. But it’s all coming out not quite as I imagined. It will be normal and unsurprising if this symphony is torn to shreds or not truly appreciated – it wouldn’t be the first time. But I definitely think it far the best and in particular by far the most sincere of all my pieces. I love it as I have never loved any other of my musical children. The work is going very well but I can no longer write as quickly as I used to, not due to a decline of my powers in old age but because I have become far more severe on myself and I lack my former self-confidence. But I have honestly never in my life been so pleased with myself, so proud, so happy in the knowledge that I have really written something good.’

12 Symphony No. 6 in B minor, Op. 74 (Mvt 4)

13 It’s interesting that Tchaikovsky, at the age of fifty-three, already spoke of himself in terms of ‘old age’. But in fact, it’s as close he got. Nine days after conducting the Sixth Symphony’s first performance, Tchaikovsky was dead. And well over a century later, the cause of his death remains a matter of the most heated controversy.

According to tradition, he died of cholera, after drinking a glass of unboiled water in a restaurant. According to gossip, subsequently buttressed by scholarly evidence, he committed suicide. Various possible motives have been cited, all of them connected in one way or another with his homosexuality. But both versions beg a number of questions, most of them too long and complex to go into here. And the literature is more confusing than helpful. In one of the most widely read and authoritative books on Tchaikovsky, the author writes ‘That Tchaikovsky committed suicide is beyond dispute.’

Not so. It’s been very persuasively disputed, with a battery of scholarly documentation. And why should Tchaikovsky have committed suicide when he was at the very peak of

his powers and his popularity? More than that, despite the gloominess of the Sixth Symphony, he was in generally high spirits and had just completed what he regarded as his best piece. And why would he have chosen a method to die which would inflict on him days of agonising pain? It's been suggested that he poisoned himself with arsenic, but there's nothing to suggest that he was a masochist, and precious little evidence that he was ever really suicidally minded. The one story we have – his supposed attempt to contract pneumonia by wading into the River Moscow – is based on a single and unreliable source. But according to the most widely accepted account of his death, he committed suicide not because he wanted to but because he was ordered to. The story goes like this: A letter was written to the Tsar by a Duke Stenbok-Fermor, reporting Tchaikovsky's supposed seduction of his young nephew. The man entrusted with the delivery of this letter, fully aware of its contents, had been a contemporary of Tchaikovsky's at the School of Jurisprudence. The man – Jacobi, by name – was appalled at the dishonour this would bring on the School and its 'old boys', and decided not to deliver the letter to the Tsar at all. Instead, he convened a special, secret 'court of honour', to use his phrase, composed of seven former school friends of Tchaikovsky. They then summoned Tchaikovsky to a 'hearing', so-called, and in order to save the school from scandal, they 'required' him (their term) to take his own life. So far, so plausible (I suppose). But. Would the most famous Russian composer in history, then at the peak of his career (and with friends in high places in many countries) meekly have accepted this verdict and done as he was told? True, he passionately loved Russia and often felt acutely homesick when he was abroad. Exile, even in luxury, might have proved intolerable. But wasn't it worth a try? If it did prove more than he could bear, then he could commit suicide. And in any case, would the Tsar have unleashed a scandal? Homosexuality in Russia was commonplace, though not openly acknowledged, and the courts appear generally to have turned a blind eye to it. And so might the Tsar have – especially in the case of Tchaikovsky, one of the brightest jewels in the Russian crown. In fact, many of the Tsar's own relatives and highest officials were also homosexual.

Well, whatever the truth (and we're unlikely ever to know it), the end result was the same. Tchaikovsky was dead, and the music-lovers of three continents struggled to believe it. The Tsar himself insisted on meeting the burial costs and instructed the Directorate of the Imperial Theatres to organise the funeral. A magnificent service was held in the Kazan Cathedral in St. Petersburg. Six thousand mourners filled the church, while sixty thousand thronged the streets outside. The Tsar didn't himself attend – that would have been unprecedented – but he sent an elaborate wreath of white roses, complementing the white cassocks of the clergy as they marched in front of the hearse, which was drawn by six horses. At five in the afternoon, on Thursday the 28th of October, 1893, Tchaikovsky's coffin was lowered into the grave at the cemetery of the Alexander Nevsky Monastery, not far from the graves of Borodin and Mussorgsky. His life was over. The life of his music was just beginning. He may have been too modest to entertain the thought, but nothing would have given him more joy than to realise that well after a century later, his works would still be played and loved by many thousands, many millions of music-lovers around the world. He was a man who could well have written of his entire life's work what Beethoven wrote on the first page of his Missa Solemnis: 'From the heart; may it go to the heart.'

14 Piano Concerto No. 1, Op. 23 (Mvt 3)