

Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky

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This article is about the 19th century composer. For other uses, see [Tchaikovsky \(disambiguation\)](#).

Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky^[a 1] (May 7, 1840 – November 6, 1893)^[a 2] was a Russian composer of the [Romantic](#) era. His wide ranging output includes [symphonies](#), operas, ballets, [instrumental](#) and [chamber music](#) and songs. He wrote some of the most popular concert and theatrical music in the classical repertoire, including the ballets *Swan Lake*, *The Sleeping Beauty* and *The Nutcracker*, the *1812 Overture*, his [First Piano Concerto](#), his last three numbered symphonies, and the opera *Eugene Onegin*.

Born into a middle-class family, Tchaikovsky was educated for a career as a civil servant, despite his obvious musical precocity. He pursued a musical career against the wishes of his family, entering the [Saint Petersburg Conservatory](#) in 1862 and graduating in 1865. This formal, Western-oriented training set him apart from the contemporary nationalistic movement embodied by the influential group of young Russian composers known as [The Five](#), with whom Tchaikovsky's professional relationship was mixed.

Although he enjoyed many popular successes, Tchaikovsky was never emotionally secure, and his life was punctuated by personal crises and periods of depression. Contributory factors were his suppressed [homosexuality](#) and fear of exposure, his disastrous marriage, and the sudden collapse of the one enduring relationship of his adult life, his 13-year association with the wealthy widow [Nadezhda von Meck](#). Amid private turmoil Tchaikovsky's public reputation grew; he was honored by the Tsar, awarded a lifetime pension and lauded in the concert halls of the world. His sudden death at the age of 53 is generally ascribed to [cholera](#), but some attribute it to [suicide](#).^[1]

Although perennially popular with concert audiences across the world, Tchaikovsky's music was often dismissed by critics in the early and mid-20th century as being vulgar and lacking in elevated thought.^[2] By the end of the 20th century, however, Tchaikovsky's status as a significant composer was generally regarded as secure.^[3]

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[\[edit\]](#) **Life**

[\[edit\]](#) **Childhood**



The Tchaikovsky family in 1848. Left to right: Pyotr, Alexandra Andreyevna (mother), Alexandra (sister), Zinaida, Nikolai, Ippolit, Ilya Petrovich (father)

Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky was born in [Votkinsk](#), a small town in present-day [Udmurtia](#), formerly province of [Vyatka](#) in the [Russian Empire](#), to a family with a long line of military service. His father, Ilya Petrovich Tchaikovsky, was an engineer of Ukrainian descent who served as a lieutenant colonel in the Department of Mines^[4] and manager of the famed Kamsko-Votkinsk Ironworks.^[5] His grandfather, Petro Fedorovich Chaika, emigrated from [Mykolaiv, Ukraine](#). The composer's mother, Alexandra Andreyevna née d'Assier, 18 years her husband's junior, was of [French](#) ancestry on her father's side, and was the second of Ilya's three wives.^{[5][6]} Tchaikovsky had four brothers (Nikolai, Ippolit, and twins Anatoly and [Modest](#)), and a sister, Alexandra. He also had a half-sister Zinaida from his father's first marriage.^[7] Tchaikovsky was particularly close to Alexandra and the twins. Anatoly later established a prominent legal career, while Modest became a dramatist, [librettist](#), and translator.^[8] Alexandra married Lev Davydov^[9] and had seven children, one of whom, "[Bob](#)", "[became] a central figure in the composer's final years".^[10] The Davydovs provided the only real family life Tchaikovsky knew as an adult,^[11] and their estate in [Kamianka](#) (now part of [Ukraine](#)) became a welcome refuge for him during his years of wandering.^[11]

In 1843, due to the growth in family responsibilities,^{[12][13]} Tchaikovsky's parents hired a French governess, Fanny Dürbach, a 22-year-old experienced teacher who, Modest later wrote, "knew both French and German equally well, and whose morals were strictly Protestant".^[12] While Dürbach had been hired to look after Tchaikovsky's elder brother Nikolai and a Tchaikovsky niece, it was not long before Tchaikovsky became curious about the young woman and, as biographer [Anthony Holden](#) wrote, "wormed his way into Fanny Dürbach's affections, and thus into her classes".^[14] Dürbach's love and affection for her charge is said to have provided a counter to Tchaikovsky's mother, who is described by Holden as a cold, unhappy, distant parent not given to displays of physical affection.^[15] However, Tchaikovsky scholar Alexander Poznansky wrote that the mother doted on her son.^[16]

Tchaikovsky began piano lessons at the age of five. A precocious pupil, he could read music as adeptly as his teacher within three years. His parents were initially supportive of his musical talents, hiring a tutor, buying an [orchestration](#) (a form of barrel organ that could imitate elaborate orchestral effects), and encouraging his study of the piano.^[17] However, his parents' passion for his musical talent soon cooled, and, in 1850, the family decided to send Tchaikovsky to the

[Imperial School of Jurisprudence](#) in [Saint Petersburg](#). The school mainly served the lesser nobility, and would prepare him for a career as a civil servant. As the minimum age for acceptance was 12, Tchaikovsky was required to spend two years boarding at the Imperial School of Jurisprudence's preparatory school, 800 miles (1,300 km) from his family.^[18] Once those two years had passed, Tchaikovsky transferred to the Imperial School of Jurisprudence to begin a seven-year course of studies.^[19]

[edit] Emerging composer

[edit] Childhood trauma and school years



Modern view of the Imperial School of Jurisprudence

On June 25, 1854 Tchaikovsky suffered the shock of his mother's death from [cholera](#). Tchaikovsky authority [David Brown](#) calls it "the crucial event of [Tchaikovsky's] years at the School of Jurisprudence",^[20] and noted that "it was certainly shattering."^[21] Tchaikovsky bemoaned the loss of his mother for the rest of his life, and admitted that it had "a huge influence on the way things turned out for me."^[22] He was so affected that he was unable to inform Fanny Dürbach until two years after the fact.^[23] At the age of 40, approximately 26 years after his mother's death, Tchaikovsky wrote to his patroness, [Nadezhda von Meck](#), "Every moment of that appalling day is as vivid to me as though it were yesterday."^[22] However, within a month of his mother's death he was making his first serious efforts at composition, a [waltz](#) in her memory. Tchaikovsky's father, who also became sick with cholera at this time but made a full recovery, immediately sent the boy back to school in hope that the classwork would occupy his mind.^[24] To make up for his sense of isolation and to compensate for the loss in his family, Tchaikovsky formed important friendships with fellow students, such as those with [Aleksey Apukhtin](#) and Vladimir Gerard, which lasted the rest of his life.^[24] He may have also been exposed to the allegedly widespread [homosexual](#) practices at the school. Whether these were formative experiences or practices toward which the composer would have gravitated normally, biographers agree that he may have discovered his sexual orientation at this time.^[25]

Music was not considered a high priority at the School of Jurisprudence,^[26] but Tchaikovsky maintained a connection to music extracurricularly, by regularly attending the theater and the opera with other students.^[27] At this time, he was fond of works by [Rossini](#), [Bellini](#), [Verdi](#) and [Mozart](#). He was known to sit at the school's [harmonium](#) after choir practice and improvise on whatever themes had just been sung. "We were amused," Vladimir Gerard later remembered, "but not imbued with any expectations of his future glory."^[28] Piano manufacturer Franz Becker made occasional visits to the school as a token music teacher. This was the only formal music instruction Tchaikovsky received there. In 1855, Ilya Tchaikovsky funded private lessons with Rudolph Kündinger, a well-known piano teacher from [Nuremberg](#). Ilya also questioned Kündinger about a musical career for his son. Kündinger replied that while he was impressed with Tchaikovsky's ability to improvise at the keyboard, nothing suggested a potential composer or even a fine performer. Tchaikovsky was told to finish his course and

then try for a post in the Ministry of Justice.^[29]

[edit] Civil service; pursuing music



Tchaikovsky in his teens

On June 10, 1859, at the age of 19, Tchaikovsky graduated from the School of Jurisprudence with the rank of titular counselor, a low rung on the civil service ladder. On June 15, he was appointed to the Ministry of Justice. Six months later he became a junior assistant and two months after that, a senior assistant, where he remained for the rest of his three-year civil service career.^[30]

In 1861, Tchaikovsky attended classes in [music theory](#) organized by the [Russian Musical Society](#) (RMS) and taught by [Nikolai Zarembo](#). A year later he followed Zarembo to the new [Saint Petersburg Conservatory](#). Tchaikovsky decided not to give up his Ministry post "until I am quite certain that I am destined to be a musician rather than a civil servant."^[31] From 1862 to 1865 he studied [harmony](#) and [counterpoint](#) with Zarembo, while [Anton Rubinstein](#), director and founder of the Conservatory, taught him instrumentation and composition.^[32] In 1863, Tchaikovsky abandoned his civil service career and began studying music full-time, graduating from the Conservatory in December 1865. Though Rubinstein was impressed by Tchaikovsky's musical talent, he and Zarembo later clashed with the young composer over his [First Symphony](#), written after his graduation, when he submitted it to them for their perusal. The symphony was given its first complete performance in Moscow in February 1868, where it was well received.^[33]

[edit] Relationship with The Five

See also: [Tchaikovsky and The Five](#)



The young [Mily Balakirev](#)

Rubinstein's Western musical orientation brought him into opposition with the [nationalistic](#) group of musicians known as [The Five](#). As Tchaikovsky was Rubinstein's best-known pupil, he became a target for the group, especially for [César Cui](#).^[34] Cui's criticisms began with a blistering review of a [cantata](#) Tchaikovsky had written as his graduation exercise from the Conservatory. Calling the piece "feeble", Cui wrote that if Tchaikovsky had any gift for music, "then at least somewhere or other [the cantata] would have broken through the fetters of the Conservatoire".^[35] The effect of this review on Tchaikovsky was devastating: "My vision grew dark, my head spun, and I ran out of the café like a madman.... All day I wandered aimlessly through the city, repeating, 'I'm sterile, insignificant, nothing will come out of me, I'm ungifted'".^[36]

When in 1867, Rubinstein resigned as conductor from Saint Petersburg's [Russian Musical Society](#) orchestra, he was replaced by composer [Mily Balakirev](#), leader of The Five. Tchaikovsky, now Professor of [Music Theory](#) at the [Moscow Conservatory](#),^[37] had already promised his *Dances of the Hay Maidens* (which he later included in his opera *The Voyevoda*, as *Characteristic Dances*) to the society. In submitting the manuscript (and perhaps mindful of Cui's review of the graduation cantata), Tchaikovsky included a note to Balakirev that ended with a request for a word of encouragement should the *Dances* not be performed.^[38] Possibly sensing a new disciple in Tchaikovsky,^[39] Balakirev wrote "with complete frankness" in his reply that he felt that Tchaikovsky was "a fully fledged artist".^[40] These letters set the tone for Tchaikovsky's relationship with Balakirev over the next two years. In 1869, the two entered into a working relationship, the result being Tchaikovsky's first recognised masterpiece, the fantasy-overture [Romeo and Juliet](#), a work which The Five wholeheartedly embraced.^[41]

Though, personally, Tchaikovsky remained on friendly terms with most of The Five, professionally, he was usually ambivalent about their music.^[42] Despite the collaboration with Balakirev on the *Romeo and Juliet* fantasy-overture, Tchaikovsky made considerable efforts to ensure his musical independence from the group as well as from the conservative faction at the Saint Petersburg Conservatory.^[43]

[\[edit\]](#) **Mature composer**



Main theme of the First Piano Concerto, as played on the piano

From 1867 to 1878, Tchaikovsky combined his professorial duties with [music criticism](#) while continuing to compose.[\[44\]](#) Some of his best-known works from this period include the [First Piano Concerto](#), the [Variations on a Rococo Theme](#) for [violoncello](#) and orchestra, the [Little Russian](#) and [Fourth Symphonies](#), the ballet [Swan Lake](#) and the opera [Eugene Onegin](#). The First Piano Concerto suffered an initial rejection by its intended dedicatee, Anton Rubinstein's brother [Nikolai](#), though he eventually championed the work.[\[45\]](#) The work was subsequently premiered in Boston in October 1875, played by [Hans von Bülow](#), whose pianism had impressed Tchaikovsky during an appearance in Moscow in March 1874.[\[46\]](#)

In Moscow, teaching with Nikolai Rubinstein, Tchaikovsky gained his first taste of famed appreciation. Introduced into the Artistic Circle, a club founded by Rubinstein, Tchaikovsky enjoyed a sense of social celebrity status among friends and fellow artists.[\[47\]](#) However, over a five-year period, Tchaikovsky became frustrated with teaching and found himself struggling financially. He gradually moved away from Rubinstein, to maintain his independence from Rubinstein's renowned reputation.[\[47\]](#) Nevertheless, while the move to Moscow was bittersweet, filled with friendship, jealousy, and inner struggles,[\[48\]](#) it was successful from a professional point of view. Tchaikovsky's musical works were frequently performed, with few delays between their composition and first performances, and the publication (after 1867) of songs and piano music for the home market helped bolster the composer's popularity.[\[49\]](#)

[\[edit\]](#) Sexuality

In his book, *Tchaikovsky: The Quest for the Inner Man*, Poznansky showed that Tchaikovsky had homosexual tendencies and that some of the composer's closest relationships were with persons of the same sex. Tchaikovsky's servant Aleksei Sofronov and the composer's nephew, [Vladimir "Bob" Davydov](#), have been suggested as possible romantic interests.[\[50\]](#) Tchaikovsky dedicated his [Sixth Symphony](#), the *Pathétique*, to Davydov.[\[51\]](#) The love theme from [Romeo and Juliet](#) is generally considered to have been inspired by Eduard Zak.[\[52\]\[53\]](#)

More controversial than Tchaikovsky's reported sexual proclivities is how comfortable the composer might have been with his sexual nature. After reading all Tchaikovsky's letters (including unpublished ones), Poznansky concludes that the composer "eventually came to see his sexual peculiarities as an insurmountable and even natural part of his personality ... without experiencing any serious psychological damage."[\[54\]](#) Relevant portions of his brother Modest's autobiography, where he tells of his brother's sexual orientation, have also been published.[\[55\]](#) Modest, like Pyotr, was homosexual.[\[47\]](#) Some letters previously suppressed by Soviet censors, where Tchaikovsky openly speaks out about his homosexuality, have been published in Russian, as well as by Poznansky in English translation.[\[56\]](#) However, biographer [Anthony Holden](#) claims British musicologist and scholar Henry Zajaczkowski's research "along psychoanalytical lines" points instead to "a severe unconscious inhibition by the composer of his sexual feelings":

One consequence of it may be sexual overindulgence as a kind of false solution: the individual thereby persuades himself that he does accept his sexual impulses. Complementing this and, also, as a psychological defense mechanism, would be precisely the idolization by Tchaikovsky of many of the young men of his circle [the self-styled "Fourth Suite"], to which Poznansky himself draws attention. If the composer's response to possible sexual objects was either to use and discard them or to idolize them, it shows that he was unable to form an integrated, secure relationship with another man. That, surely, was [Tchaikovsky's] tragedy.^[57]

Musicologist and historian Roland John Wiley suggests a third alternative, based on Tchaikovsky's letters. He suggests that while Tchaikovsky experienced "no unbearable guilt" over his homosexuality, he remained aware of the negative consequences of that knowledge becoming public, especially of the ramifications for his family.^[47] His decision to enter into a heterosexual union and try to lead a double life was prompted by several factors—the possibility of exposure, the willingness to please his father, his own desire for a permanent home and his love of children and family.^[47] While Tchaikovsky may have been romantically active, the evidence for "sexual argot and passionate encounter" is limited.^[47] He sought out the company of homosexuals in his circle for extended periods, "associating openly and establishing professional connections with them."^[47] Wiley adds, "Amateurish criticism to the contrary, there is no warrant to assume, this period [of his short-lived marriage] excepted, that Tchaikovsky's sexuality ever deeply impaired his inspiration, or made his music idiosyncratically confessional or incapable of philosophical utterance."^[47] Professor Robert Greenberg of the San Francisco Conservatory of Music agrees, describes his turn towards a troubled inner world where he, "found a world of self-expression that he might never have discovered had he felt less alienated from society."^[52]

[edit] Unsuccessful marriage

See also: [Désirée Artôt](#) and [Antonina Miliukova](#)

In 1868, at the age of 28, Tchaikovsky met the Belgian soprano [Désirée Artôt](#), then on a tour of Russia. They became infatuated, and were engaged to be married.^[58] He dedicated his Romance in F minor for piano, Op. 5, to her. However, on September 15, 1869, without any communication with Tchaikovsky, Artôt married a member of her company, the Spanish baritone [Mariano Padilla y Ramos](#). The general view has been that Tchaikovsky got over the affair fairly quickly. It has, however, been postulated that he coded her name into the [Piano Concerto No. 1 in B-flat minor](#) and the tone-poem *Fatum*.^[59] They met on a handful of later occasions, and in October 1888 he wrote *Six French Songs*, Op. 65, for her, in response to her request for a single song. Tchaikovsky later claimed she was the only woman he ever loved.^[60]

In April 1877 Tchaikovsky's favorite pupil, Vladimir Shilovsky, married suddenly.^{[61][a 3][62]} Shilovsky's wedding may in turn have spurred Tchaikovsky to consider such a step himself.^[61] He declared his intention to marry in a letter to his brother.^[63] There followed Tchaikovsky's ill-starred marriage to one of his former composition students, [Antonina Miliukova](#). The brief time with his wife drove him to an emotional crisis, which was followed by a stay in [Clarens, Switzerland](#), for rest and recovery.^[64] They remained legally married but never lived together again nor had any children, though she later gave birth to three children by another man.^[65]

Tchaikovsky's marital debacle may have forced him to face the full truth concerning his sexuality.^[66] He apparently never again considered matrimony as a camouflage or escape, nor considered himself capable of loving women in the same manner as men.^[66] He wrote to his

brother Anatoly from [Florence, Italy](#) on February 19, 1878,

Thanks to the regularity of my life, to the sometimes tedious but always inviolable calm, and above all, thanks to time which heals all wounds, I have completely recovered from my *insanity*. There's no doubt that for some months on end I was a bit *insane*, and only now, when I'm completely recovered, have I learned to relate *objectively* to everything which I did during my brief insanity. That man who in May took it into his head to marry Antonina Ivanova, who during June wrote a whole opera as though nothing had happened, who in July married, who in September fled from his wife, who in November railed at Rome and so on—that man wasn't I, but another Pyotr Ilyich.^[67]

A few days later, in another letter to Anatoly, he added that there was "nothing more futile than wanting to be anything other than what I am by nature."^[68]

[edit] Creative genius and emotional turmoil

It has been commonly held that the strain of the marriage and Tchaikovsky's emotional state immediately preceding it may have enhanced Tchaikovsky's creativity. To some extent, this may have been the case. While the [Fourth Symphony](#) was begun some months before Tchaikovsky married Antonina,^[69] both the symphony and the opera [Eugene Onegin](#), arguably two of his finest compositions,^[69] are held up as proof of this enhanced creativity.^[69] He finished both these works in the six months between his engagement and the completion of the rest cure following his marriage breakdown. While in Clarens he also composed his [Violin Concerto](#), with the technical assistance of one of his former students (and possibly his lover), violinist [Iosif Kotek](#). Kotek had earlier helped establish contact between Tchaikovsky and Nadezhda von Meck, the widow of a railway magnate, who became the composer's patron and confidante.^[70]

Like the First Piano Concerto, the Violin Concerto was rejected initially by its intended dedicatee, virtuoso and pedagogue [Leopold Auer](#), and was premiered by [Adolph Brodsky](#). While the work eventually achieved public success, the audience hissed at its premiere in Vienna,^[71] and it was denigrated by music critic [Eduard Hanslick](#):



Hans von Bülow became a fervent champion of Tchaikovsky's music.

The Russian composer Tchaikovsky is surely no ordinary talent, but rather, an inflated one, obsessed with posturing as a man of genius, and lacking all discrimination and taste ... the same can be said for his new, long, and ambitious Violin Concerto. For a while it proceeds soberly, musically, and not mindlessly, but soon vulgarity gains the upper hand and dominates until the end of the first movement. The violin is no longer played: it is tugged about, torn, beaten black and blue ... The Adagio is well on the way to reconciling us and winning us over when, all too soon, it breaks off to make way for a finale that transports us to the brutal and wretched jollity of a Russian church festival. We see a host of gross and savage faces, hear crude curses, and smell the booze. In the course of a discussion of obscener illustrations, [Friedrich Vischer](#) once maintained that there were pictures whose stink one could see. Tchaikovsky's Violin Concerto confronts us for the first time with the hideous idea that there may be musical compositions whose stink one can hear.^[72]

Auer belatedly accepted the concerto, and eventually played it to great public success. In future years he taught the work to his pupils, including [Jascha Heifetz](#) and [Nathan Milstein](#). Auer later said about Hanslick's comment that "the last movement was redolent of vodka [...]" did credit neither to his good judgment nor to his reputation as a critic."[\[73\]](#)

The intensity of personal emotion now flowing through Tchaikovsky's works was entirely new to Russian music.[\[74\]](#) It prompted some Russian commentators to place his name alongside that of novelist [Fyodor Dostoyevsky](#).[\[74\]](#) Like Dostoyevsky's characters, they felt the musical hero in Tchaikovsky's music persisted in exploring the meaning of life while trapped in a fatal love-death-faith triangle.[\[74\]](#) The critic Ossovski wrote of Tchaikovsky and Dostoyevsky: "With a hidden passion they both stop at moments of horror, total spiritual collapse, and finding acute sweetness in the cold trepidation of the heart before the abyss, they both force the reader to experience those feelings, too."[\[75\]](#)

Tchaikovsky's fame among concert audiences began to expand outside Russia, and continued to grow within it. Hans von Bülow had become a fervent champion of the composer's work after hearing some of it in a Moscow concert during Lent of 1874.[\[76\]](#) In a German newspaper later that year, he praised the [First String Quartet](#), *Romeo and Juliet* and other works, and he later took up many other Tchaikovsky works both as pianist and conductor.[\[76\]](#) In France, Camille Benoit began introducing Tchaikovsky's music to readers of the *Revue et gazette musicale de Paris*. The music also received significant exposure during the 1878 International Exhibition in Paris. While Tchaikovsky's reputation as a composer grew, a corresponding increase in performances of his works did not occur until he began conducting them himself, starting in the mid-1880s.[\[76\]](#) Nevertheless, by 1880, all of the operas Tchaikovsky had completed up that point had been staged, and his orchestral works had been given performances that had been sympathetically received.[\[77\]](#)

[\[edit\]](#) **Nadezhda von Meck**

See also: [Nadezhda von Meck](#)



Nadezhda von Meck, Tchaikovsky's patroness and confidante from 1877 to 1890
Nadezhda von Meck was the wealthy widow of a Russian railway tycoon and an influential patron of the arts. Having already heard some of Tchaikovsky's work, she was encouraged by [Iosif Kotek](#) to commission some chamber pieces from him.[\[78\]](#) Her support became an important element in Tchaikovsky's life; she eventually paid him an annual subsidy of 6,000 [rubles](#), which made it possible for him to resign from the Moscow Conservatory in October 1878 at the age of 38, and concentrate on composition.[\[79\]](#) With von Meck's patronage came a relationship that, at her insistence, was mainly epistolary – she stipulated they were never to meet face to face. They exchanged well over 1,000 letters between 1877 and 1890. In these letters Tchaikovsky was more open about much of his life and his creative processes than he had been to any other person.[\[80\]](#)

As well as being a dedicated supporter of Tchaikovsky's musical works, Nadezhda von Meck became a vital enabler in his day-to-day existence by her financial support and friendship.[\[81\]](#) As he explained to her,

There is something so special about our relationship that it often stops me in my tracks with

amazement. I have told you more than once, I believe, that you have come to seem to me the hand of Fate itself, watching over me and protecting me. The very fact that I do not know you personally, while feeling so close to you, accords you in my eyes the special status of an unseen but benevolent presence, like a benign Providence.^[82]

In 1884 Tchaikovsky and von Meck became related by marriage when one of her sons, Nikolay, married Tchaikovsky's niece Anna Davydova.^[83] However, in 1890 she suddenly ended her relationship with the composer. She was suffering from health problems that made writing difficult; there were family pressures, and also financial difficulties arising from the mismanagement of her estate by her son Vladimir.^[84] The break with Tchaikovsky was announced in a letter delivered by a trusted servant, rather than by the usual postal service. It contained a request that he not forget her, and was accompanied by a year's subsidy in advance. She claimed bankruptcy, which, if not literally true, was evidently a real threat at the time.^[85]

Tchaikovsky may have been aware for nearly a year of his patroness's financial difficulties.^[86] This did not stop him from continuing to take his allowance for granted (with regular protestations of his eternal gratitude), nor did he offer to return the advance he received with the farewell letter. Despite his growing celebrity throughout Europe, von Meck's allowance still made up a third of the composer's income.^[86] While he may have no longer needed her money as much as in the past, the loss of her friendship and encouragement was devastating; he remained bewildered and resentful about her abrupt disappearance for the remaining three years of his life.^[87]

[edit] Years of wandering



[Tsar Alexander III](#), who remained a devotee of Tchaikovsky's music, conferred an award and a lifelong pension on the composer.

Tchaikovsky returned to Moscow Conservatory in the autumn of 1879, having been away from Russia for a year after the disintegration of his marriage. However, he quickly resigned, settling in Kamenka yet traveling incessantly.^[88] During these years, assured of a regular income from Nadezhda von Meck, he wandered around Europe and rural Russia, never staying long in any one place and living mainly alone, avoiding social contact whenever possible.^[88] This may have been due in part to troubles with Antonina, who alternately agreed to, then refused, divorce, at one point exacerbating matters by moving into an apartment directly above her husband's.^[89] Tchaikovsky listed Antonina's accusations to him in detail to Modest: "I am a deceiver who married her in order to hide my true nature ... I insulted her every day, her sufferings at my hands were great ... she is appalled by my shameful vice, etc., etc." It is possible that he lived the rest of his life in dread of Antonina's power to expose publicly his sexual leanings.^[90] These factors may explain why, except for the [piano trio](#) which he wrote upon the death of Nikolai Rubinstein, his best work from this period is found in genres which did not depend heavily on personal expression.^[89]

While Tchaikovsky's reputation grew rapidly outside Russia, it was, as [Alexandre Benois](#) wrote in his memoirs, "considered obligatory [in progressive musical circles in Russia] to treat Tchaikovsky as a renegade, a master overly dependent on the West."^[91] In 1880 this assessment changed, practically overnight. During commemoration ceremonies for the Pushkin Monument in Moscow, Dostoyevsky charged that [Alexander Pushkin](#) had given a prophetic call to Russia for "universal unity" with the West.^[91] An unprecedented acclaim for

Dostoyevsky's message spread throughout Russia, and disdain for Tchaikovsky's music dissipated. He even drew a cult following among the young [intelligentsia](#) of St. Petersburg, including Benois, [Léon Bakst](#) and [Sergei Diaghilev](#).^[92]



[Cathedral of Christ the Saviour](#), Moscow in 1903

In 1880 the [Cathedral of Christ the Saviour](#), commissioned by Tsar [Alexander I](#) to commemorate the defeat of Napoleon in 1812, was nearing completion in Moscow; the 25th anniversary of the coronation of [Alexander II](#) in 1881 was imminent;^[a 4] and the 1882 Moscow Arts and Industry Exhibition was in the planning stage. Nikolai Rubinstein suggested a grand commemorative piece for use in related festivities. Tchaikovsky began the project in October 1880, finishing it within six weeks. He wrote to Nadezhda von Meck that the resulting work, the [1812 Overture](#), would be "very loud and noisy, but I wrote it with no warm feeling of love, and therefore there will probably be no artistic merits in it."^[93] He also warned conductor [Eduard Nápravník](#) that "I shan't be at all surprised and offended if you find that it is in a style unsuitable for symphony concerts."^[93] Nevertheless, this work has become for many, as Tchaikovsky authority [Professor David Brown](#) phrased it, "the piece by Tchaikovsky they know best."^[94]

On March 23, 1881, Nikolai Rubinstein died in [Paris](#). Tchaikovsky was holidaying in [Rome](#), and he went immediately to attend the funeral in Paris for his greatly respected mentor, but arrived too late (although he was part of a group of people who saw Rubinstein's coffin off on a train back to Russia).^[95] In December, he started work on his [Piano Trio in A minor](#), "dedicated to the memory of a great artist."^[96] The trio was first performed privately at the Moscow Conservatory, where Rubinstein had been director, on the first anniversary of his death by three of its staff—pianist [Sergei Taneyev](#), violinist [Jan Hřímalý](#) and cellist [Wilhelm Fitzenhagen](#).^[97] The piece became extremely popular during the composer's lifetime and, in an ironic twist of fate, became Tchaikovsky's own [elegy](#) when played at memorial concerts in Moscow and St. Petersburg in November 1893.^[98]

[edit] Return to Russia

During 1884, now 44 years old, Tchaikovsky began to shed his unsociability and restlessness. In March of that year [Tsar Alexander III](#) conferred upon him the [Order of St. Vladimir](#) (fourth class), which carried with it [hereditary nobility](#)^[99] and won Tchaikovsky a personal audience with the Tsar.^[100] The Tsar's decoration was a visible seal of official approval, that helped Tchaikovsky's social rehabilitation.^[99] This rehabilitation may have been cemented in the composer's mind with the extreme success of his [Third Orchestral Suite](#) at its January 1885 premiere in Saint Petersburg, under [Hans von Bülow](#)'s direction.^[101] Tchaikovsky wrote to Nadezhda von Meck: "I have never seen such a triumph. I saw the whole audience was moved, and grateful to me. These moments are the finest adornments of an artist's life. Thanks to these it is worth living and laboring."^[102] The press was likewise unanimously favorable.^[101]



Tchaikovsky's last home, in [Klin](#), now the Tchaikovsky Museum

In 1885, after Tchaikovsky resettled in Russia, the Tsar asked personally for a new production of *Eugene Onegin* to be staged in Saint Petersburg. The opera had previously been seen only in Moscow, produced by a student ensemble from the Conservatory. Though critical reception to the Saint Petersburg production of *Onegin* was negative, the opera drew full houses every night; 15 years later the composer's brother Modest identified this as the moment Tchaikovsky became known and appreciated by the masses, and he achieved the greatest degree of popularity ever accorded to a Russian composer. News of the opera's success spread, and the work was produced by opera houses throughout Russia and abroad.^[103]

A feature of the Saint Petersburg production of *Onegin* was that Alexander III requested that the opera be staged not at the [Mariyinsky Theater](#) but at the [Bolshoi Kamenniy Theater](#). This served notice that Tchaikovsky's music was replacing [Italian opera](#) as the official imperial art. In addition, thanks to [Ivan Vsevolozhsky](#), Director of the Imperial Theaters and a patron of the composer, Tchaikovsky was awarded a lifetime pension of 3,000 rubles per year from the Tsar. This essentially made him the premier court composer, in practice if not in actual title.^[104]

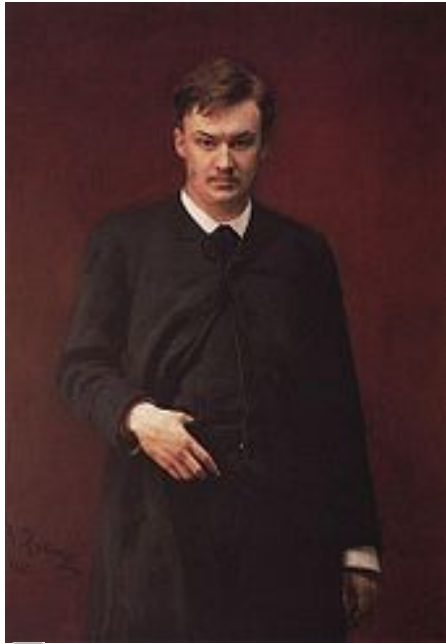
While he still felt a disdain for public life, Tchaikovsky now participated in it for two reasons—his increasing celebrity and what he felt was his duty to promote Russian music.^[100] To this end, he helped support his former pupil Taneyev, who was now director of Moscow Conservatory, by attending student examinations and negotiating the sometimes sensitive relations among various members of the staff.^[100] Tchaikovsky also served as director of the Moscow branch of the Russian Musical Society during the 1889-1890 season. In this post, he invited a number of international celebrities to conduct, including [Johannes Brahms](#), [Antonín Dvořák](#) and [Jules Massenet](#).^[100]

Another area in which Tchaikovsky promoted Russian music in general as well as his own compositions was as a guest conductor.^[100] In January 1887 he substituted at the [Bolshoi Theater](#) in Moscow on short notice for the first three performances of his opera *Cherevichki*.^[105] He had wanted to conquer conducting for at least a decade, as he saw that success outside Russia depended to some extent on his conducting his own works.^[106] Within a year of the *Cherevichki* performances, Tchaikovsky was in considerable demand throughout Europe and Russia, which helped him overcome a life-long [stage fright](#) and boosted his self-assurance.^[107] Conducting brought him to America in 1891, where he led the [New York Music Society's orchestra](#) in his *Festival Coronation March* at the inaugural concert of [New York's Carnegie Hall](#).^[108]

In 1888 Tchaikovsky led the premiere of his [Fifth Symphony](#) in Saint Petersburg, repeating the work a week later with the first performance of his tone poem *Hamlet*. While both works were received with extreme enthusiasm by audiences, critics proved hostile, with [César Cui](#) calling the symphony "routine" and "meretricious."^[109] Undeterred, Tchaikovsky continued to conduct the symphony in Russia and Europe.^[110]

[edit] Belyayev circle

See also: [Tchaikovsky and the Belyayev circle](#)



Portrait of Glazunov by [Ilya Repin](#), 1887.

In November 1887, Tchaikovsky arrived in Saint Petersburg in time to hear several of the [Russian Symphony Concerts](#), which were devoted exclusively to the music of Russian composers. One of these concerts included the first complete performance of the final version of his [First Symphony](#); another featured the premiere of the revised version of Rimsky-Korsakov's Third Symphony.^[111] Before this visit Tchaikovsky had spent much time keeping in touch with Rimsky-Korsakov and those around him.^[112] Rimsky-Korsakov, along with [Alexander Glazunov](#), [Anatoly Lyadov](#) and several other nationalistically minded composers and musicians, had formed a group called the [Belyayev circle](#).^[113] This group was named after timber merchant [Mitrofan Belyayev](#), an amateur musician who became a influential music patron and publisher after he had taken an interest in Glazunov's work.^[113] (Belyayev also funded the Russian Symphony Concerts as a forum for native composers to have their works heard in public.)^[113] During Tchaikovsky's visit, he spent much time in the company of Glazunov, Lyadov and Rimsky-Korsakov, and the somewhat fraught relationship he had endured with the Belyayev circle's predecessor, The Five, melded into something more harmonious. This relationship lasted until Tchaikovsky's death in late 1893.^{[114][115]}

A side benefit of Tchaikovsky's friendship with Glazunov, Lyadov and Rimsky-Korsakov was an increased confidence in his own abilities as a composer, along with a willingness to let his musical works stand alongside those of his contemporaries. Tchaikovsky wrote to Nadezhda von Meck in January 1889, after being once again well-represented in Belyayev's concerts, that he had "always tried to place myself *outside* all parties and to show in every way possible that I love and respect every honorable and gifted public figure in music, whatever his tendency", and that he considered himself "flattered to appear on the concert platform" beside composers in the Belyayev circle.^[116] This was an acknowledgment of wholehearted readiness for his music to be heard with that of these composers, delivered in a tone of implicit confidence that there were no comparisons from which to fear.^[117]

In 1892, Tchaikovsky was voted a member of the [Académie des Beaux-Arts](#) in France; he was only the second Russian, after the sculptor [Mark Antokolsky](#), to be so honored.^[118] The following year, the [University of Cambridge](#) in Britain awarded Tchaikovsky an honorary

[Doctor of Music](#) degree.^[119]

[\[edit\]](#) Death

See also: [Death of Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky](#)



Tchaikovsky's death mask



Tchaikovsky's tomb at the [Alexander Nevsky Monastery](#)

Tchaikovsky died in Saint Petersburg on November 6, 1893, nine days after the premiere of his [Sixth Symphony](#), the *Pathétique*. Though only 53 years old, he lived a long life compared to many Russian 19th century composers. He was interred in [Tikhvin Cemetery](#) at the Alexander Nevsky Monastery, near the graves of fellow-composers [Alexander Borodin](#), [Mikhail Glinka](#), [Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov](#), [Mily Balakirev](#) and [Modest Mussorgsky](#).^[120] Because of the *Pathétique's* formal innovation and the overwhelming emotional content of its outer movements, the work was received by the public with silent incomprehension at its first performance.^[121] The second performance, led by Nápravník, took place 20 days later at a memorial concert^[122] and was much more favorably received.^[123] The *Pathétique* has since become one of Tchaikovsky's best known works.

Tchaikovsky's death has traditionally been attributed to [cholera](#), most probably contracted through drinking contaminated water several days earlier.^[124] However, some, including English musicologist and Tchaikovsky authority [David Brown](#) and biographer [Anthony Holden](#), have theorized that his death was a suicide. According to one variation of the theory, a

sentence of suicide was imposed in a "court of honor" by Tchaikovsky's fellow alumni of the St. Petersburg Imperial School of Jurisprudence, as a censure of the composer's homosexuality. This unproven theory was first broached publicly by Russian musicologist Alexandra Orlova in 1979, when she emigrated to the West.^[1] Wiley writes in the *New Grove* (2001), "The polemics over [Tchaikovsky's] death have reached an impasse ... Rumor attached to the famous die hard ... As for illness, problems of evidence offer little hope of satisfactory resolution: the state of diagnosis; the confusion of witnesses; disregard of long-term effects of smoking and alcohol. We do not know how Tchaikovsky died. We may never find out"^[2]

[\[edit\]](#) Music

See also: [List of compositions by Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky](#), [Music of Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky](#), and [Symphonies by Tchaikovsky](#)



Original cast of Tchaikovsky's ballet, *The Sleeping Beauty*, Saint Petersburg, 1890
Tchaikovsky wrote many works which are popular with the classical music public, including his *Romeo and Juliet*, the *1812 Overture*, his three ballets (*The Nutcracker*, *Swan Lake*, *The Sleeping Beauty*) and *Marche Slave*. These, along with two of his four [concertos](#), three of his six numbered [symphonies](#) and, of his 10 operas, *The Queen of Spades* and *Eugene Onegin*, are among his most familiar works. Almost as popular are the *Manfred Symphony*, *Francesca da Rimini*, the *Capriccio Italien* and the *Serenade for Strings*. His three [string quartets](#) and [piano trio](#) all contain beautiful passages, while recitalists still perform some of his 106 songs.^[125] Tchaikovsky also wrote over a hundred piano works, covering the entire span of his creative life. Brown has asserted that "while some of these can be challenging technically, they are mostly charming, unpretentious compositions intended for amateur pianists."^[126] He adds, however, that "there is more attractive and resourceful music in some of these pieces than one might be inclined to expect."^[127]

[\[edit\]](#) Creative range

Tchaikovsky's formal conservatory training allowed him to write works with Western-oriented attitudes and techniques. His music showcases a wide range and breadth of technique, from a poised "Classical" form simulating 18th century [Rococo](#) elegance, to a style more characteristic of Russian nationalists, or (according to Brown) a musical idiom expressly to channel his own overwrought emotions.^[128] Despite his reputation as a "weeping machine,"^[125] self-expression was not a central principle for Tchaikovsky. In a letter to von Meck dated December 5, 1878, he explained there were two kinds of inspiration for a symphonic composer, a subjective and an objective one, and that [program music](#) could and should exist, just as it was impossible to demand that literature make do without the epic element and limit itself to lyricism alone. Correspondingly, the large scale orchestral works Tchaikovsky composed can be divided into two categories—symphonies in one category, and other works such as [symphonic poems](#) in the other.^[129] According to musicologist Francis Maes, program music such as *Francesca da Rimini* or the *Manfred Symphony* was as much a part of the composer's artistic

credo as the expression of his "lyric ego."^[130] Maes also identifies a group of compositions which fall outside the dichotomy of program music versus "lyrical ego," where he hearkens toward pre-Romantic aesthetics. Works in this group include the four orchestral suites, *Capriccio Italien*, the Violin Concerto and the Serenade for Strings.^[131]

One of the recognizable characteristics of Tchaikovsky's works is his use of harmony or rhythm to create a sudden, powerful release of emotion. Like the other Romantic composers of the era, Tchaikovsky colored his works with rich harmonies, utilizing German Augmented Sixth chords, minor triads with added major sixths, and augmented triads. These colorful harmonies progressed to moments of extreme emotion. Though the peaks were preceded by building tension, Tchaikovsky was often criticized for his lack of development throughout his material. Yet what critics failed to accept was the fact that Tchaikovsky was not attempting to smoothly develop his works, but rather disregard seamless flow and embrace the intense emotion created by momentous bursts of fervid harmonies.^[132]

[edit] Reception and reputation

Although Tchaikovsky's music has always been popular with audiences, it has at times been judged harshly by musicians and composers. However, his reputation as a significant composer is now generally regarded as secure.^[3] The initially criticized *Swan Lake* is currently seen as the first step in Tchaikovsky's reputation as one of the most important and talented ballet composers.^[133] His music has won a significant following among concert audiences that is second only to the music of Beethoven,^[2] thanks in large part to what Harold C. Schonberg terms "a sweet, inexhaustible, supersensuous fund of melody ... touched with neuroticism, as emotional as a scream from a window on a dark night."^[134] According to Wiley, this combination of supercharged melody and surcharged emotion polarized listeners, with popular appeal of Tchaikovsky's music counterbalanced by critical disdain of it as vulgar and lacking in elevated thought or philosophy.^[2] More recently, Tchaikovsky's music has received a professional reevaluation, with musicians reacting more favorably to its tunefulness and craftsmanship.^[125]

[edit] Public considerations

Tchaikovsky believed that his professionalism in combining skill and high standards in his musical works separated him from his contemporaries in *The Five*. He shared several of their ideals, including an emphasis on national character in music. His aim, however, was to link those ideals to a standard high enough to satisfy Western European criteria. His professionalism also fueled his desire to reach a broad public, not just nationally but internationally, which he eventually did.^[135]

He may also have been influenced by the almost "eighteenth-century" patronage prevalent in Russia at the time, which was still strongly influenced by its aristocracy. In this style of patronage, the patron and the artist often met on equal terms. Dedications of works to patrons were not gestures of humble gratitude but expressions of artistic **partnership**. The dedication of the Fourth Symphony to Nadezhda von Meck is known to be a seal on their friendship. Tchaikovsky's relationship with Duke Konstantin Konstantinovich bore creative fruit in the *Six Songs*, Op. 63, for which the grand duke wrote the words.^[136] Tchaikovsky found no aesthetic conflict in playing to the tastes of his audiences, though it was never established that he satisfied any other tastes but his own. The patriotic themes and stylization of 18th-century

melodies in his works lined up with the values of the Russian aristocracy.^[137]

[\[edit\]](#) Compositional style

Music samples

[Valse in F-sharp minor](#)



From *Twelve Pieces for piano*, Op. 40, No. 9, a digital recording by Kevin MacLeod



[Romeo and Juliet Overture](#)



Performed by the Skidmore College Orchestra, courtesy of [Musopen](#)

[1812 Overture](#)



Performed by the Skidmore College Orchestra. Courtesy of [Musopen](#)

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According to Brown in the *New Grove* (1980), Tchaikovsky's melodies ranged "from Western style to folksong stylizations and occasionally folksongs themselves."^[138] His use of repetitions within these melodies generally reflect the [sequential](#) style of Western practices, which he sometimes extended at immense length, building "into an emotional experience of almost unbearable intensity."^[138] He experimented occasionally with unusual meters, although more usually, as in his dance tunes, he employed a firm, essentially regular meter that "sometimes becomes the main expressive agent in some movements due to its vigorous use."^[138] Tchaikovsky also practiced a wide range of harmony, from the Western harmonic and textural practices of his first two string quartets to the use of the [whole tone scale](#) in the center of the finale of the Second Symphony; the latter was a practice more typically used by The Five.^[138] Since Tchaikovsky wrote most of his music for the orchestra, his musical textures became increasingly conditioned by the orchestral colors he employed, especially after the [Second Orchestral Suite](#). Brown maintains that while the composer was grounded in Western orchestral practices, he "preferred bright and sharply differentiated orchestral coloring in the tradition established by [Glinka](#)."^[138] He tends to exploit primarily the treble instruments for their "fleet delicacy,"^[138] though he balances this tendency with "a matching exploration of the darker, even gloomy sounds of the bass instruments."^[138]

[\[edit\]](#) Impact

Wiley cites Tchaikovsky as "the first composer of a new Russian type, fully professional, who firmly assimilated traditions of Western European symphonic mastery; in a deeply original, personal and national style he unified the symphonic thought of Beethoven and Schumann with the works of Glinka, and transformed Liszt's and Berlioz's achievements in [depictive-programmatic music](#) into matters of Shakespearean elevation and psychological import."^[139]

Holden maintains that Tchaikovsky was the first legitimate *professional* Russian composer, stating that only traditions of folksong and music for the [Russian Orthodox Church](#) existed

before Tchaikovsky's birth. Holden continues, "Twenty years after Tchaikovsky's death, in 1913, [Igor Stravinsky's *The Rite of Spring*](#) erupted onto the musical scene, signalling Russia's arrival into [20th century music](#). Between these two very different worlds Tchaikovsky's music became the sole bridge."[\[140\]](#)

Russian musicologist [Solomon Volkov](#) maintains that Tchaikovsky was perhaps the first Russian composer to think seriously about his country's place in European musical culture.[\[141\]](#) As the composer wrote to Nadezhda von Meck from Paris,

How pleasant it is to be convinced firsthand of the success of our literature in France. Every book *étalage* displays translations of [Tolstoy](#), [Turgenev](#), and [Dostoyevsky](#) ... The newspapers are constantly printing rapturous articles about one or another of these writers. Perhaps such a time will come for Russian music as well![\[142\]](#)

Tchaikovsky became the first Russian composer to personally acquaint foreign audiences with his own works, as well as those of other Russian composers.[\[143\]](#) He also formed close business and personal ties with many of the leading musicians of Europe and the [United States](#). For Russians, Volkov asserts, this was all something new and unusual.[\[144\]](#)

Finally, the impact of Tchaikovsky's own works, especially in ballet, should not be underestimated; his mastery of *danseuse* (melodies which match physical movements perfectly), along with vivid orchestration, effective themes and continuity of thought were unprecedented in the genre,[\[145\]](#) setting new standards for the role of music in classical ballet. [\[146\]](#) Noel Goodwin characterized *Swan Lake* as "one of [ballet's] enduring masterworks"[\[146\]](#) and *The Sleeping Beauty* as "the supreme example of 19th century classical ballet,"[\[147\]](#) while Wiley called the latter work "powerful, diverse and rhythmically complex."[\[148\]](#)