

# The Composer: Peter Ilyich Tchaikovsky 1840-1893

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Peter Ilyich Tchaikovsky was born in Kamsko-Votinsk, Russia on May 7, 1840. He began taking piano lessons when he was seven years old. Even then he exhibited an extreme sensitivity to music and a keen musical ear.

In 1850 his well-to-do, middle-class family moved to St. Petersburg where he attended school. He was mildly interested in music but did not study it in school. Even so, he made his first attempts at composition when he was fourteen. He graduated from the School of Jurisprudence in 1859 and began working at the Ministry of Justice as a clerk first-class. He began studying music seriously at the age of twenty-one working with Nicolia Zarembo until the St. Petersburg Conservatory opened in 1862. A year later he resigned from the Ministry of Justice to devote his life to music. He was one of the best students at the Conservatory and its director, Anton Rubenstein, took a special interest in Tchaikovsky. When Rubenstein's brother Nicholas, director of the Moscow Conservatory, was searching for a harmony teacher, Anton recommended the young composer.

In 1877 he entered into a curious relationship that would change his life forever. Madame Nadezhda Filaretovna von Meck, the wealthy widow of a Russian railway tycoon offered to subsidize his career. She was a talented amateur musician and patron of the arts who loved Tchaikovsky's music. However, there was one strange condition to von Meck's financial support – they were never to meet! This relationship lasted for fourteen years, and the financial independence it provided allowed him to resign from the Conservatory in 1878 to concentrate on composing.

Tchaikovsky composed three complete ballets: *Swan Lake*, *The Sleeping Beauty*, and *The Nutcracker*, although ballet is implicit in much of his other music. George Balanchine and many other choreographers have set many works to Tchaikovsky's music – music that was not originally composed for ballet. In the mid- to late 1850s, ballet music had become secondary to the requests of the ballet master and was considered unimaginative. When Tchaikovsky began composing music for ballet, many of his peers were surprised that he would even consider such a thing. The music world was astonished that such a great composer would "stoop so low." Tchaikovsky thought differently and wrote to his fellow composer, Rimsky-Korsakov, "The directorate of the Opera have commissioned me to write the music for the ballet *Le Lac des Cygnes*. I accepted the work, partly because I need the money and partly because I have long cherished a desire to try my hand at this type of music." With this commission, music for the Ballet was changed forever.

Tchaikovsky's score was more complex, complicated, and symphonic than any ballet music before it. Julius (Wenzel) Reisinger, the original choreographer assigned to the work, was a mediocre talent and the ballerina on which the piece was set, Pelegaya Karpakova, found the rhythm too difficult to interpret. The score was cut, augmented, and adjusted. It was not well received. He wrote to his brother Modest that the failure was due to the inadequacy of the choreographer, conductor, dancers, and orchestra. With some revisions, it was performed for several years, but then went out of the repertoire.

In May of 1891, he embarked on a trip to America during which he conducted several of his compositions for the inaugural concerts of the new Carnegie Hall in New York City. The two men mainly responsible for his visit were Walter Damrosch, the twenty-eight year old pianist-conductor of the New York Symphony Society, and Andrew Carnegie, the wealthy Scottish-born philanthropist.

It was unfortunate that Tchaikovsky was not able to experience the huge success of this new *Swan Lake* production and its ensuing immortality in ballet and orchestral repertoire. The première of his final composition, his Sixth Symphony ("Pathétique") was performed on October 28, 1893 in St. Petersburg. Only a few days later, the composer became very ill and succumbed to the cholera epidemic that was raging through Russia at the time.