

## **Symphony No. 6 in b minor, Op. 74 (“Pathétique”)**

**Pyotr Tchaikovsky**

Born: May 7, 1840– Votkinsk, Russia

Died: November 6, 1893 – Saint Petersburg, Russia

*Piece Length: Approximately 45 minutes.*

Composed between February and August 1893, the Symphony No. 6 in b minor (“Pathétique”) was premiered in St. Petersburg October 28, 1893, just nine days prior to Tchaikovsky’s mysterious death. There has been much speculation about the connection between the symphony and his passing. The official explanation of his death was cholera after drinking contaminated water, but questions arose about the accuracy of this report. Soon, theories began to emerge, one of which was that he killed himself as a “court of honor” after his homosexuality was discovered. That being said, there is no evidence to draw any definitive conclusions. Likewise, the theory that this symphony is a sort of artistic final statement is also impossible to confirm. In fact, Tchaikovsky seems to have been in rather high spirits during the writing of this work as well as after the premiere. His brother, Modest, noted that “I had not seen him so bright for a long time past” after sending the score to his publisher.

One aspect of the symphony that had led to perhaps an over-reading of the meaning of this work is its subtitle. His original title was “Program Symphony” and in letters Tchaikovsky suggested that the work was informed by an extramusical program, although he never had a desire to make the inspiration and program known. Modest claimed to be the one to suggest the Russian word “Patetitčeskaja” as a title, which was translated in French as “Pathétique” which translated to “pathetic” in English. However, the original Russian’s meaning is “passionate” or “emotional”, not “arousing pity.”

Beyond the suggestive title, the work also features a few clues to a possible program that can easily lead one to connect the symphony to Tchaikovsky’s death. For one, the first movement opens with a tragic introduction that utilizes a musical gesture known as a “lament bass” in the double basses—a descending chromatic line that moves from the tonic to the dominant most famously used in Henry Purcell’s closing aria “When I am laid in earth” (known more commonly as “Dido’s Lament”) from the opera Dido and Aeneas. This bass line has become a musical symbol that has been used by composers to express extreme grief or mourning. Another clue, again in the first movement, can be found in the second theme, which is heavily reminiscent of Don Jose’s aria “The Flower Song” from Bizet’s opera Carmen, a favorite of Tchaikovsky’s. The most impassioned moment of the melody, marked “incalzando” (urging) in the score, seems to quote the line “To throw one glance at me, you took possession of my whole being” from the aria. The novel order of the movements also invite one to surmise a programmatic meaning. If this were a more traditionally structured symphony, the work would end with that powerful and energetic coda that concludes the third movement of this work. However, by essentially switching the traditional order of the slow movement with the finale, Tchaikovsky ends the piece on a tragic note, a device that Mahler would use in his Symphony No. 9 (his final completed symphony). Yet, these are all just hints at a connection between this work and an unstated program about which Tchaikovsky insisted “will remain a mystery to everyone—let them guess.”

This passionate emotion described above is on full display in the opening movement, the longest of the work. This movement, in sonata form, features numerous tempo changes to reflect the intense nature of this highly expressive music. It opens darkly with a solo bassoon playing a four-note fragment that will eventually evolve into the main theme against the “lament bass”. This dark introduction leads into the first theme, introduced in the strings and marked Allegro non troppo in the score (fast, but not too fast).

This theme seems reluctant to start as the violins present the four-note fragment of the introduction hesitantly before the music eventually starts to move forward, eventually building energy that leads to a six-chord brass fanfare that interrupts the momentum of the music before arriving at the first tutti of the work. The music calms down before presenting the lyrical second theme-inspired by "The Flower Song" aria-in the strings marked *Andante* (a moderately slow tempo). A new musical idea is soon introduced in the flutes at a tempo marked *Moderato mosso* (moderately fast) that brightens the mood of the music before the "Flower Song" theme returns passionately in the full orchestra. The exposition of the movement closes with gentle calmness as the beginning of the second theme is fragmented and played in the clarinets, going to a remarkable "pppppp" dynamic-an extraordinarily quiet sound. The intense development section starts with a bang as a fortissimo chord launches the music forward at an *Allegro vivo* tempo (quick, lively). The fragmented themes and constant changing keys against furious string passages gives the music an unsettled quality before arriving at the recapitulation with the complete restatement of the first theme in the entire orchestra. The music continues to build to a passionate climax featuring a descending scale that dies down to silence before restating the second, "Flower Song", theme. This theme eventually fades into the gentle coda.

The second movement, in a ternary (A-B-A) form, features a novel approach to the Minuet or Scherzo movement of a traditional symphony. Here, Tchaikovsky presents a waltz in D major with a twist, instead of a typical waltz meter of 3/4, Tchaikovsky writes this in an asymmetrical 5/4 meter. This gives the music a graceful flow that glides along elegantly. The trio section of the movement is distinguishable by the pedal tone D being played in the basses- a note that consistently plays in the background against a darker melody in b minor before the waltz returns to the brighter D major, wrapping up the movement with a gentle coda that features the trio's theme.

The third movement, a vibrant scherzo, opens with quiet and active string passages as melodic fragments that suggest a march are played throughout the winds. Eventually, the clarinets take these fragments to present the march-like melody playfully in its complete form. The music starts to build with the horns presenting the whole theme before the music cycles back to the beginning of the movement again. This time, however, when the march-like theme reappears in completion, it is majestic and powerfully played by the violins and horns. This leads to an energetic coda that would have been a wonderful way to end this work had Tchaikovsky chosen to order his movements in a more traditional manner.

The symphony, however, takes a tragic turn in the finale. The finale, a sort of sonata rondo form (A-B-A-C-A-B) is marked "*Adagio lamentoso*" (slow and lamenting). The A theme, in b minor, opens with a descending scale that gives the music its tragic atmosphere. The B theme, in D major, is at a slightly faster tempo, "*Andante*" (a moderately slow tempo) and features a syncopated rhythm in the horns that might suggest a heartbeat (perhaps another clue to a possible program?). This theme shares the four steps down musical idea that Tchaikovsky used in his second theme of the first movement (the "Flower Song" inspired theme). The music builds to a passionate climax that pushes the tempo to *Vivace* (very fast) before rapid scales in the strings descent to a sudden stop. After a few false starts of the B theme, the A theme returns one again in b minor. The movement takes the opening four notes of the B theme to build to the climactic C section that continues the descending four note idea against a long rising scale that finally arrives at the final statement of the A theme played *fff* (very loud) before the music starts to die away. A tam-tam strike marks a transition into the last, tragic statement of the B theme, this time in b minor as the music continues to descend the depths of the lowest instruments of the orchestra against the syncopated heart-beat rhythm that eventually slows down and dies away itself, allowing further speculation of the symphony's meaning to continue to this day.