

Symphony No. 6 in B Minor, Op. 74, "Pathétique"

Pyotr Il'yich Tchaikovsky (1840–1893)

Written: 1893

Movements: Four

Style: Romantic

Duration: 46 minutes

Shortly after he compiled a suite from his *Nutcracker* ballet, Tchaikovsky scribbled down the plan for what he hoped would be his next symphony: "The ultimate essence of the plan of the symphony is LIFE." However, he never finished the work. "There is nothing particularly interesting or symphonic in it," he wrote to his nephew. "I decided to throw it away and forget about it. This is an irreversible decision, and it is wonderful that I made it."

Tchaikovsky didn't really destroy the work; he eventually used parts of it for a piano concerto. He didn't give up the *idea* of the symphony either. In another letter to his nephew he wrote, I had the idea of writing a program symphony . . . The theme of it is full of subjective feeling, so much so that as I was mentally composing it . . . I frequently shed tears. There will be numerous innovations from the formal point of view: the finale, for instance, is to be not a noisy allegro, but a long adagio.

The symphony begins with an introductory motive played very quietly and slowly by the bassoon. Shortly after, the body of the work begins with the same motive played faster by the strings. The character of this first theme is full of impulsive passion. The famous second theme is a real contrast. It is slow and hushed. These two themes form the exposition of the first movement that, in spite of its unique sentiment, still follows the standard form with a development and recapitulation.

The second and third movements, however, do not follow the normal scheme of a symphony. The second movement is a lilting sort of waltz instead of a slow somber thing. It has a strange limp to it: Its rhythm is in five, not the typical three. The third movement is an entirely unexpected march! Both themes of the finale are based upon descending melodic motives, giving it a brooding and sorrowful character. The symphony ends with the same gloominess with which it begins.

After he finished writing the symphony, Tchaikovsky confessed, "I consider this symphony the best thing I have ever done. In any case, it is the most deeply felt. And I love it as I have never loved any of my compositions." He died nine days after its premiere, a victim of cholera.