

# TCHAIKOVSKY

Symphony No. 4  
Capriccio Italien Op. 45



Royal Philharmonic Orchestra  
DANIELE GATTI



## Acknowledgments

Photos of Daniele Gatti by Primo Gnani

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THORSTEN STEDER

PIOTR ILYICH  
**TCHAIKOVSKY** (1840–1893)

**Symphony No. 4 in F minor, Op. 36 (1877–78) 39:21**

- 1** I Andante sostenuto – Moderato con anima 16:59
- 2** II Andantino in modo di canzona 8:10
- 3** III Scherzo: Pizzicato ostinato – Allegro 5:45
- 4** IV Finale: Allegro con fuoco 8:27
- 5** **Capriccio Italien, Op. 45 (1880) 14:12**

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# TCHAIKOVSKY Symphony No. 4 • Capriccio Italien

**W**HATEVER ELSE its value – as an avenue for emotional catharsis, an ornament meant to please, an object that serves utilitarian ends – each piece of music is aural autobiography. Composers cannot escape the fact that their creations inevitably reflect their time and their training, their inspirations and insights. At the same time, it is impossible not to notice that in the works of Tchaikovsky, personality became paramount as never before. Not in his earliest works, perhaps, which were products of his conservatory tutelage in Moscow and St. Petersburg and resonate with innate gifts for melody and orchestration. But beginning in the mid-1870s, something changed. Personal struggles were made publicly manifest and inner conflicts found outward expression. Although the value of Tchaikovsky's works – of the works, indeed, of any composer – resides ultimately in the music itself, the exceptional nature of their creation demands attention.

In the Fourth Symphony (1877-78), most notably, composition and confession are confounded. Tchaikovsky composed his prior three symphonies in situations that seem ordinary in comparison to the genesis of the Fourth. The First (called *Winter Daydreams*) was the composer's first major professional endeavor; it emerged with difficulty in 1866 and '67, but was successfully premiered in 1868. (It would be revised in 1874.) The Second (the *Little Russian*, a nickname acquired after the composer's death, in recognition of the Ukrainian folk-tunes it employs) was composed in 1872 and premiered in '73; showing Tchaikovsky's music at its most nationalistic, it was an immediate success (though in 1880 it, too, would be revised). And the Third (the *Polish*, so named, for the *Tempo di polacca* of its final movement) was warmly received at its 1875 first performance.

More compelling is the context of the Fourth, whose first movement is a work of turbulence that darkens the meaning of *Sturm und Drang*. The Symphony emerged from the confluence of two defining incidents: Tchaikovsky's introduction to Nadezhda von Meck and his marriage to Antonina Milyukova. The marriage, a "rash and hasty act of a desperate man," according to Tchaikovsky biographer David Brown, would be short lived (*Grove*, vol. 18, p. 616). In the spring of 1877, the impulsive Mlle Milyukova forced on the composer her attention and affection. Initially she was spurned and frankly told by the composer that a full physical relation could never exist between them. Tchaikovsky's homosexuality was an inescapable fact of his life, though living in a society whose rigid norms endorsed heterosexuality, it also was a ceaseless source of torment.

Tchaikovsky, however, also pitied her. At work at the time on *Eugene Onegin*, his opera based on a poem by Pushkin, and mindful of the misery caused by Onegin's heartless rejection of Tatiana, Tchaikovsky unwisely married Mlle Milyukova in the summer of 1877, having changed his mind, if not his heart. Nightmares immediately haunted him, and within months after his marriage he attempted suicide and experienced a complete collapse – what we today would call a nervous breakdown. A doctor ordered the obvious prescription: Tchaikovsky was to separate from Mlle Milyukova and never see her again. Thus the summer's marriage was the autumn's estrangement. In 1881 they divorced.

The relationship with Mme von Meck was equal in intensity but far more salubrious. A widow of exceptional wealth, Mme von Meck first became aware of Tchaikovsky at the start of 1877, when she heard a performance of *Burya* ("The Tempest"), his symphonic fantasy after Shakespeare. She wrote the composer to commission small works for violin and piano, and their correspondence grew in intimacy and importance. Over the fourteen years of their epistolary relationship, they never once spoke – on the two occasions when they might have, they skirted one another in silence – but for reasons that can only be imperfectly explained, they became symbiotically attached, each the lodestone for the other's spiritual existence.

As David Brown explains this singular relationship: "For each the other remained a fantasy figure, unspoiled by the disenchantment of reality. The root of the relationship for Mme von Meck, as for Tchaikovsky, appears to have been a revulsion against physical relations with the opposite sex. The death of her husband in 1876 had released her from sexual demands, and, now evidently frigid, she could idealize Tchaikovsky as revealed in his music, find emotional nourishment and fulfillment in responding to that music, and in correspondence pour out to him her thoughts and feelings without risking the pressures of a more personal relationship" (*Grove*, p. 616).

Brown further speculates that "The growing confirmation of his homosexuality was already leaving its marks on Tchaikovsky's music. From the beginning his musical language had been generous in its emotional power, but the element of overstatement, shown...in the heightened emotional temperature of the Fourth Symphony, must surely arise from the need to find an outlet for emotional drives that could not be channeled into a full physical relationship. The advent of Mme von Meck could hardly have been more timely: for him she remained a depersonalized woman, making no physical demands, but longing for the confidences of his most personal thoughts and feelings. When, after the stunning blow of his attempted marriage, an emotional blockage came between Tchaikovsky and his own music...the privacy

of his written confidences with Mme von Meck became of even more crucial importance" (*Grove*, p. 615).

We might speculate even further and imagine that Mme von Meck, nine years older than the composer, restored to Tchaikovsky the mother he lost when he was still a teen. Reminiscences tell us that Tchaikovsky and his mother were exceptionally close. When she died shortly after the composer's fourteenth birthday, it was, according to Brown, "a shattering blow" (*Grove*, p. 607). It is not difficult to imagine that, among her other roles, Mme von Meck – unconditionally supportive, unquestionably generous – was an ideal surrogate mother.

Regardless of the reasons, both known and unknown, for their mutual attraction, there is no doubt that Tchaikovsky found his ideal audience in Mme von Meck. After receiving a transcription she commissioned from the composer – it was a four-hand arrangement of the funeral march from Tchaikovsky's opera *Oprichnik* ("The Oprichnik") – she was effusive in her praise: "Your march is so wonderful, Peter Ilyich, that it throws me – as I hoped – into a state of blissful madness; a condition in which one loses consciousness of all that is bitter and offensive in life... Listening to such music, I seem to soar above all earthly thoughts, my temples throb, my heart beats wildly, a mist swims before my eyes and my ears drink in the enchantment of the music. I feel that all is well with me, and I do not want to be reawakened. Ah, God, how great is the man who has power to give others such moments of bliss!" (*Life & Letters*, p. 214)

Composition of the Fourth Symphony began in the spring of 1877, at about the same time that Tchaikovsky first was approached by Mlle Milyukova, and after they were married, in July, it is fascinating to see how Tchaikovsky presented his situation to others, and, indeed, to himself. Orderly feelings of a conventional sort were offered to the outside world, and even to Mme von Meck. Regarding his domestic life, Tchaikovsky wrote Mme von Meck (on September 12, 1877) that "the arrangements of our home leave nothing to be desired. My wife has done all she possibly could to please me. It is really a comfortable and pretty home. All is clean, new and artistic" (*Life & Letters*, p. 222). The same day he wrote another letter to his younger brother Anatol, in which he cracked the curtain slightly. Referring to his return back in Moscow, he related about his wife, "Poor woman, she has gone through some miserable experiences in getting our home ready... Twice she was robbed, and for the last few days she has been obliged to stay at home all day, not daring to leave the place in the care of the

\*The composer, teacher and friend of Tchaikovsky, Sergei Taneyev.

cook. But our home pleases me; it is pretty, comfortable, and not altogether wanting in luxury” (*Life & Letters*, p. 223). Ten days after writing these letters Tchaikovsky suffered his severe nervous breakdown.

Throughout this period of turmoil – the disaster of his marriage and the discovery of his muse – the Fourth Symphony became the vessel into which he poured his deepest feelings. Premiered early in 1878 and dedicated to his “best friend” – Mme von Meck – the work was considered by the composer to be a compact between them, and he wrote often and always about “our symphony.” Thus in August, 1877: “Our symphony progresses. The first movement will give me a great deal of trouble as regards orchestration. It is very long and complicated; at the same time I consider it the best movement. The three remaining movements are very simple, and it will be pleasant and easy to orchestrate them” (*Life & Letters*, p. 222).

And in December 1877: “I am working diligently at the orchestration of our symphony,” and he continues: “Dear Nadejda Filaretovna, I may be making a mistake, but it seems to me this Symphony is not a mediocre work, but the best I have done so far. How glad I am that it is ours, and that, hearing it, you will know how much I thought of you with every bar” (*Self-Portrait*, p. 240).

Mme von Meck attended the work’s Moscow première at a concert of the Russian Musical Society in the spring of 1878, and she found it irresistible, though in general it met with a mixed reception. She wrote to the composer in Italy, where he was traveling with friends, and from Florence he replied: “What joy your letter brought me today, dearest Nadejda Filaretovna! I am inexpressibly delighted that the symphony pleases you: that hearing it, you felt just as I did while writing it, and that my music found its way to your heart... You ask if in composing this symphony I had a special programme in view... Our symphony has a programme. That is to say, it is possible to express its contents in words, and I will tell you – and you alone – the meaning of the entire work and of its separate movements...” Then, in almost one thousand words, Tchaikovsky parses his symphony, equating the first movement’s opening motto with Fate, “that inevitable force which checks our aspirations towards happiness”; explaining how the second movement “expresses another phase of suffering”; how in the third movement “no definite feelings find expression”; and how the fourth movement shows that “Happiness does exist, simple and unspoiled. Be glad in others’ gladness. This makes life possible” (*Life & Letters*, p. 274).

David Brown has written regarding the composer’s fanciful exegesis that “while it is impossible to take the whole programme seriously, it is certainly easy to believe that the opening theme does symbolize fate, for although it engages briefly with the main material during the first movement’s development and coda, its chief function is to intrude peremptorily and inexorably, sweeping

aside all other material. On a purely musical level it provides some powerful dramatic moments, while its strategic insertion, first between the exposition and development, then between the recapitulation and coda, aids structural clarity” (*Grove*, p. 616).

The motto thus clarified what might otherwise have been perceived as an even more difficult movement, “the most complicated (in the Symphony), but also the best,” according to the composer. Much of its purported complication comes from harmonic idiosyncrasies. Although subscribing to the structure of sonata form, the movement does not respect the form’s traditional harmonic trajectories. Rather than being based on the tensions between tonic and dominant, the time-honored recipe that informs the music of Tchaikovsky’s idol, Mozart – “the highest, the culminating point that beauty has attained in the sphere of music” (*Diaries*, p. 248) – the movement moves from the home key of F minor through a circle of minor thirds. In the context of this far-reaching harmonic activity, the opening motto of Fate provides a welcome melodic anchor at structurally critical moments.

While surely unorthodox when compared with the standard operating procedure of Classical Vienna, Tchaikovsky’s harmonic inventiveness can be said to have been anticipated and encouraged by Beethoven, who famously began his First Symphony not with a statement that reinforces the home key of C major, but with a progression that moves from the dominant of the sub-dominant to the sub-dominant itself (i.e., from V of IV, to IV). Beethoven, as the peerless commentator Donald Francis Tovey has written, was “the most conservative of revolutionists; a Revolutionist without the (capital) R” (*Essays*, vol. 1). With this seemingly innocuous gesture, Beethoven opened up a realm of harmonic possibilities that would lead to Schubert (himself fascinated by relationships based on the interval of the third), to Tchaikovsky, and beyond.

Each of the Fourth Symphony’s middle movements is a model of invention and craftsmanship. The second movement, an *Andantino in modo di canzona*, is rich in poignant sentiment, and thanks to a memorably lyrical oboe solo, wears its heart on its sleeve, while the third movement, a Scherzo, is most memorable for its creative use of sonorities – pizzicato strings are contrasted with the woodwind choir which is contrasted with brass and kettledrum, before all three groups are merged together. But these movements are best heard as breathers before the glorious noise of the Finale, an applause machine that’s all panache and propulsion.

And padding, perhaps. In an extraordinary letter written in 1888 to the Grand Duke Konstantin Romanov, an ardent admirer of his music, Tchaikovsky admitted that “I have suffered all my life from my incapacity to grasp form in general. I have fought against this innate weakness, not – I am proud to say – without good results; yet I shall go to my grave without having produced anything really perfect in form. There is frequently padding in my

works; to an experienced eye the stitches show in the seams, but I cannot help it.” (*Self-Portrait*, p. 300).

Tchaikovsky’s most astute critic was his pupil and friend, the composer Sergei Taneyev. In a letter to Tchaikovsky written a month after the Symphony’s première, Taneyev shared with the composer his insightful comments, pro and con. The first movement, for instance, “is disproportionately long in comparison with the others,” he noted; “it seems to me a symphonic poem to which the other three movements are added fortuitously. The fanfare for trumpets in the introduction, which is repeated in other places, the frequent change of tempo in the tributary themes – all this makes me think that a programme is being treated here. Otherwise the movement pleases me. But the rhythm – the dotted rhythm first heard, innocently enough, in the Fate motto (in measures three and four) and heard repeatedly throughout the movement – appears too often and becomes wearisome” (*Life & Letters*, p. 292).

Tchaikovsky would surely have acknowledged the first movement’s exceptional length. It contains 422 measures as compared to the 293 measures of the next longest movement, the finale, and its playing time (as in the performance heard here) is virtually twice as long. The composer would also have been the first to admit that a programme was indeed being treated, the programme described in his ardent letter, cited above, to Mme von Meck.

But I imagine Tchaikovsky would not have agreed with Taneyev’s comment about the dotted rhythm being overused. Tchaikovsky considered his Fourth Symphony “a reflection” of Beethoven’s Fifth (*Life & Letters*, p. 294), and one presumes he perceived in both works a similar single-mindedness and emotional *gravitas*. Beethoven, in fact, after Mozart, was the composer Tchaikovsky most admired (excepting for the late works, such as the quartets, which he considered to be mostly “chaos” – *Diaries*, p. 248), and there is perhaps no piece of music that is rhythmically more obsessive than the first movement of Beethoven’s Fifth. Unless it is the first movement of Beethoven’s Seventh, which relentlessly exploits a dotted rhythmic figure not dissimilar to the one used by Tchaikovsky in the first movement of his Fourth.

Taneyev also made a more sweeping observation about the work overall: “In my opinion, the Symphony has one defect, to which I shall never be reconciled: in every movement there are phrases which sound like ballet music: the middle section of the Andante, the Trio of the Scherzo, and a kind of March in the Finale. Hearing the Symphony, my inner eye sees involuntarily ‘our prima ballerina,’ which puts me out of humour and spoils my pleasure in the many beauties of the work” (*Life & Letters*, p. 292).

Sensitive and highly-strung, Tchaikovsky defended himself with exceptional prickliness and at exorbitant length, painting a self-portrait that, alas, is undoubtedly accurate. After thanking Taneyev for expressing his “frank opinion,” Tchaikovsky turned to the

comment that irked him most: “many things in your letter astonished me. I have no idea what you consider ‘ballet music,’ or why you should object to it. Do you regard every melody in a lively dance-rhythm as ‘ballet music’? In that case how can you reconcile yourself to the majority of Beethoven’s symphonies, for in them you will find similar melodies on every page? Or do you mean to say that the Trio of my Scherzo is in the style of Minkus, Gerber, or Pugnani? It does not, to my mind, deserve such criticism. I never can understand why ‘ballet music’ should be used as a contemptuous epithet. The music of a ballet is not invariably bad, there are good works of this class – Delibes’ *Sylvia*, for instance. And when the music is good, what difference does it make whether Sobieschanskaya (the *prima ballerina* of the Moscow Opera) dances to it or not? I can only say that certain portions of my Symphony do not please you because *they recall the ballet*, not because they are intrinsically bad. You may be right, but I do not see why dance tunes should not be employed episodically in a symphony” (*Life & Letters*, p. 293), and so on in a similar vein for an additional seven-hundred words.

Tchaikovsky was correct; many ballets have indeed been created to superior music, not least among them the ballets made to Tchaikovsky’s own scores: *Swan Lake*, *The Sleeping Beauty*, and *The Nutcracker*. And Taneyev was correct, as well; parts of Tchaikovsky’s Fourth Symphony immediately evoke the ballet, most strikingly the second movement, whose opening invites the perfect *pas de deux*. For cosmopolitan audiences in Moscow, where the Fourth Symphony was premiered, balletic images, for better or for worse, must indelibly have been etched in the mind’s eye, if not necessarily images from Tchaikovsky’s *Swan Lake*; this first of his three great ballet scores was initially choreographed by Julius Reisinger, the Austrian-born ballet master at the Bolshoi, and unsuccessfully premiered at the theater in 1877.

Over the coming decades, however, the repository of mental images would vastly increase in both quality and quantity, and especially after Tchaikovsky began his historic collaboration with Marius Petipa, the French-born dancer who had taken charge of ballet at St. Petersburg’s Mariinsky Theater in 1869. There he collaborated with Tchaikovsky on the creation of *The Sleeping Beauty* (premiered at the Mariinsky in 1890) and *The Nutcracker* (the Mariinsky, 1892), and, with Lev Ivanov, on a reworked *Swan Lake* (Mariinsky, 1895). Indeed, it was Petipa – no, it was Petipa and Tchaikovsky – who must be credited with having established classical dance as a major Russian art form.

Having weathered critics both insightful (like Taneyev) and inane (like the New York commentator who characterized the Symphony as “one of the most thoroughly Russian, i.e., semi-barbaric, compositions ever heard in this city” – *Lexicon*, p. 209), the Fourth Symphony has long been a bedrock of the orchestral

repertory. It, in fact, has become perhaps too familiar, its contours too taken for granted, its details ignored.

The performance heard here made the annotator an advocate, and here are some of the moments, each chosen from the first movement, I especially appreciated:

The opening motto is played *fortissimo*, as asked for by Tchaikovsky, and not, as is often the case, with maximum force. The motto is also held back dynamically when it next appears, at measure 193, but in subsequent appearances it is heard triple *forte* to tremendous effect.

The dynamic gradations are tellingly observed as the Andante introduction evolves towards the Moderato first theme: *fortissimo* through measure 15, *forte* in measure 16 and 17, *mezzo forte* in measures 18 and 19, *piano* in measures 21 to 23, and *pianissimo* in measures 23 to 26.

The *moderato con anima* theme (beginning at measure 27) is phrased with wonderful plasticity, animated with a nice edge of agitation, and inflected with a sense of the spoken word. If Tatiana’s letter had been even longer, it might have sounded like this.

The clarinet theme first heard at the upbeat to measure 116 (and again at measure 295) ends with a five-note figure that gets echoed and slightly elaborated by the other woodwinds, and in this performance this filigree is not merely ornamental but expressive.

The two sections marked *ben sostenuto* (beginning with measures 134 and 313) are rendered somewhat slower than Tchaikovsky suggested, and this languid tempo helps create a remarkable context: against a cushion of French horns, unison strings play a theme complementary to the woodwind melody (at measures 147 and 326) and the sonority they produce is exceptional – burnished, rich, alluring.

Though only details, these moments, and others like them, show in the aggregate how potent a piece this can be. If we have taken Tchaikovsky’s Fourth for granted, it is a pleasure to become reacquainted.

Composed for the most part during a three-month Roman sojourn at the start of 1880, the *Capriccio Italien* is distantly related to those works from the Baroque that portray, however fancifully, foreign peoples and places – Telemann’s *Don Quichotte*, Couperin’s *Les Nations*, and Rameau’s *Les Indes Galantes*, for instance – and it shares a fascination for the foreign evinced by Debussy in his *Estampes* and *Images*.

Closest of all, however, is a work of Mikhail Glinka. The *Capriccio Italien*, David Brown tells us, is “a conscious attempt to emulate Glinka’s evocation of a Mediterranean world in his Spanish Overtures, and its debt to the second of these, *Recollection of a Summer Night in Madrid*, is patent in its succession of independent sections loosely patched together, each conjuring up some unspecified aspect of Italian life or scenery. The orchestration, too, shows a good deal of Glinka’s fastidious ear for clean and well-contrasted sonorities” (*Grove*, p. 620).

Despite its derivations, the work is an amiable series of snapshots with striking contrasts of tone and mood and much local color. Tchaikovsky was well acquainted with Italy – it was a foreign destination of choice – and his portrait effectively captures the colors and scents of the south.

– GEORGE GELLES

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## Daniele Gatti *music director*



Considered the 'foremost conductor of his generation,' Italian conductor Daniele Gatti has galvanized the music world with his dramatic and instinctive style. A charismatic maestro, he demonstrates an equal mastery of the orchestra and the opera stage, delivering consistently probing interpretations imbued with fire and refined sensitivity.

Music Director of the Royal Philharmonic Orchestra since 1996, Gatti has inspired audiences and critics alike with his enraptured performances; his recordings have attracted enthusiastic notices. Since 1998, Gatti is also Music Director of Bologna's opera house, the Teatro Comunale, and has conducted opera to great acclaim the world over.

A native of Milan, Daniele Gatti studied piano and violin at the Giuseppe Verdi Conservatory, earning his degree in composition and conducting. Following his La Scala debut at the age of 27, he led productions at Venice's Teatro La Fenice, the Chicago Lyric Opera, Berlin Staatsoper and New York's Metropolitan Opera. Maestro Gatti was Music Director of the Accademia Nazionale di Santa Cecilia in Rome from 1992 to 1997 as well as Principal Guest Conductor of the Royal Opera House, Covent Garden from 1995 to 1997.

He made his Carnegie Hall debut in the 1989/90 season with the American Symphony Orchestra, and has since led most of the world's major orchestras. He has become a favourite of audiences in Chicago where he first conducted the Chicago Symphony in 1994, returning every other season since. Gatti's 1996 debut with the New York Philharmonic was hailed as a "remarkable performance" (*The New York Times*) and led to a triumphant return in 1998, 2000, and again, in 2002.

His touring engagements at the head of the RPO frequently take him to Germany, Italy, Spain, Belgium, Mexico and the USA. In their first recording for **harmonia mundi usa**, Maestro Gatti led the RPO in a visionary performance of Tchaikovsky's Symphony No. 5; the collaboration will continue with the recording of Symphony No. 6, the *Pathétique*.

## Royal Philharmonic Orchestra

The history of the Royal Philharmonic Orchestra is inextricably linked to its founder, Sir Thomas Beecham, one of Britain's greatest conductors and classical music's more colourful figures. When in 1946 Beecham set out to create a world-class ensemble from the finest players in the country, he envisioned an orchestra that would bring the greatest music ever composed to every corner of the United Kingdom. Since Sir Thomas's death in 1961, the Orchestra's musical direction and development has been guided by a series of distinguished maestros including Rudolf Kempe, Antal Dorati, André Previn and Vladimir Ashkenazy. Today, under the inspired leadership and gifted musicianship of Daniele Gatti (Music Director since 1996), the Orchestra continues to expand its international reputation while maintaining a deep commitment to its self-appointed role as Britain's national orchestra.

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