

Peter Ilyich Tchaikovsky

SYMPHONY NO. **4** IN F MINOR, OP.36  
OVERTURE "ROMEO AND JULIET"



RUSSIAN NATIONAL ORCHESTRA  
Mikhail Pletnev

## Peter Ilyich Tchaikovsky (1840-1893)

### Symphony No. 4 in F minor Op. 36 (1877)

- |    |   |     |
|----|---|-----|
| 1  | Andante sostenuto – Moderato con anima      | 17. |
| 42 |   |     |
| 2  | Andantino in modo di canzone                | 8.  |
| 55 |   |     |
| 3  | Scherzo – Pizzicato ostinato : Allegro      | 5.  |
| 21 |   |     |
| 4  | Finale : Allegro con fuoco                  | 8.  |
| 33 |   |     |
| 5  | <b>Romeo and Juliet</b>                     |     |
|    | Overture – Fantasia (Final version of 1880) | 19. |
| 46 |   |     |

## Russian National Orchestra

Concertmaster: Alexander Bruni  
conducted by **Mikhail Pletnev**

Total playing time: 60.19

Executive Producers: Rick Walker & Job Maarse  
Recording Producer: Job Maarse  
Balance Engineer: Erdo Groot  
Recording Engineer: Roger de Schot  
Editing: Roger de Schot

Recording Venue: DZZ Studio 5, Moscow, June 2010

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## Based on personal experience

Not many world-famous composers have been equally successful at writing both absolute and programme music. Moreover, only a mere handful has managed to achieve something truly extraordinary in both genres. One of these composers was Peter Tchaikovsky. When inspired by great literature, his passion for reading likely stood him in good stead: after all, as far as Tchaikovsky was concerned, reading ranked “among the greatest moments of pleasure.” In his programme music, his priority was not to elaborate a literary programme, or provide a detailed sketch of the action; rather, he preferred to portray the psyche of the characters and their development, as well as the emotional impasses and vortexes into which they manoeuvred themselves, or into which they were drawn. His Fantasy-Overture *Romeo and Juliet* is a perfect example of this psychologising music.

As a young composer, Tchaikovsky received great encouragement from Mili Balakirev: the latter suggested Tchaikovsky used Shakespeare’s *Romeo and Juliet* as a model for his composition – Balakirev most likely knew of Tchaikovsky’s unrequited love for the Belgian soprano Désirée Artôt, and assumed that the composer would draw inspiration from the famous Shakespearean lovers.

However, Tchaikovsky set to work without any true enthusiasm, merely complying with Balakirev’s detailed instructions for the composition: “Begin with the music that represents Friar Lawrence, then interrupt this with the dispute between the feuding families, and then provide a portrait of the young lovers.” By November 1869, Tchaikovsky had completed the first version. Two further versions followed, as advised by Balakirev: the original ending was replaced for the première in March 1870. To be sure, more than 10 years passed before Tchaikovsky was completely satisfied with his work: he came up with a final version in 1880 (the version on this recording). When planning the music, Tchaikovsky concentrated on the three primary elements of the drama, which he structured in sonata movement form.

Thanks to its chorale-like character, the extended Adagio introduction conveys a sense of devout spirituality, as portrayed in the character of Friar Lawrence. This is followed in the Allegro giusto by a violent episode, with the rhythmical-energetic main theme symbolizing the dispute between the Montagues and the Capulets (percussion!). Finally, the second theme enters, a lyrically flowing woodwind canto, representing the love between Romeo and Juliet. At the première in Moscow in 1870, the Overture was given a cool reception; and the music did no better during the first performances in the West. However, Tchaikovsky lived to see opinions change, and nowadays *Romeo and Juliet* ranks among the most famous settings of Shakespeare’s works in the orchestral literature.

Whereas the composer was inspired by the fateful love of a poetic couple to write *Romeo and Juliet*, thus his own life experience played a crucial role in the creation of his Symphony No. 4 in F minor, Op. 36: during 1876 and 1877, two completely different women had unexpectedly appeared in Tchaikovsky’s otherwise “womanless” life: the wealthy art-loving widow, Nadezhda von Meck, and his former pupil Antonina Milyukova. The former was destined to be his generous patroness for well over a decade, whereas the latter became his “alibi” spouse for just a few weeks. Nadezhda von Meck had written to Tchaikovsky at the end of 1876, and was soon providing the composer (who was plagued by financial worries and depressions) with financial as well as humane and moral support. The fascinating aspect of this relationship was that never the twain met, all contact took place by means of over 1,000 letters. In one of these, Tchaikovsky reported to her his marriage with Antonina Miljukova. This sudden panicky and irrational act, which took place in July 1877, was intended by disguise Tchaikovsky’s homosexual tendencies; however, the unlikely couple separated after only a matter of weeks. Tchaikovsky then made a half-hearted suicide attempt, and subsequently fled from Russia. Tchaikovsky rid his soul of his neurotic agonies by writing the Symphony No. 4. Although he had begun working on this in the winter of 1876/77, he did not finish it until January 1878. During this difficult phase of his life, Nadezhda von Meck figured not only as his patroness, but also as his confidante. Therefore, it is not surprising that Tchaikovsky dedicated his Symphony No. 4 “à mon meilleur ami” (to my best friend): Nadezhda von Meck.

Even though Tchaikovsky sent Madame von Meck an extensively detailed “programme” of the work in March 1877, in no way can the Symphony No. 4 be categorised as “programme music”. The comments made by the composer on his work remain non-committal – indeed, of little substance – and do not contribute to the comprehension of the form and structure of the symphony. Tchaikovsky had a premonition of the manner in which his thoughts would be interpreted: “When I went to put the letter in the envelope, I read it through one more time, and was horrified at the lack of clarity and the deficiencies contained within the programme that I am sending you”. Already, the music for *Romeo and Juliet* was said to be portraying a reconstruction of psychological events. The same thought occurs in the Symphony No. 4: one can also consider the music to be an emotional “translation” or elaboration of personal experiences and feelings. The Symphony No. 4 adheres to the classical four-movement form, with a hugely expanded first movement. This is preceded by an introduction, which presents its fanfare theme in a stark manner, without accompaniment: this theme is consistently breaking through at the structural seams of the movement, interrupting the fur-

ther course of the music. In the programme, Tchaikovsky describes this as “Fate, that disastrous power, which restrains one’s urge for happiness from achieving its objective, [...] a power that hangs constantly above our heads, like the sword of Damocles”. Both inner movements are structurally similar, consisting of three parts: A-B-A. After the violence of the first movement, they provide the listener with a particular relief. The energy-filled Finale contains three themes that appear sequentially (not unsimilar to Bruckner). Of these, the second theme stands out, a Russian folk-song called “In the field stood a birch tree”. Just before the entrance of the Coda, there is a reappearance of the Fate theme from the beginning of the symphony, after which the movement rushes forwards towards its conclusion, which absolutely demands applause, in an all but uncurbed lack of restraint.

Franz Steiger

English translation: Fiona J. Stroker-Gale

## Russian National Orchestra

The Russian National Orchestra has been in demand throughout the music world ever since its 1990 Moscow premiere. Of the orchestra’s 1996 debut at the BBC Proms in London, the Evening Standard wrote, “They played with such captivating beauty that the audience gave an involuntary sigh of pleasure.” More recently, they were described as “a living symbol of the best in Russian art” (*Miami Herald*) and “as close to perfect as one could hope for” (*Trinity Mirror*).

The first Russian orchestra to perform at the Vatican and in Israel, the RNO maintains an active international tour schedule, appearing in Europe, Asia and the Americas. Guest artists performing with the RNO on tour include conductors Vladimir Jurowski, Nicola Luisotti, Antonio Pappano, Alan Gilbert, Carlo Ponti and Patrick Summers, and soloists Martha Argerich, Yefim Bronfman, Lang Lang, Pinchas Zukerman, Sir James Galway, Joshua Bell, Itzhak Perlman, Steven Isserlis, Dmitri Hvorostovsky, Simone Kermes and Renée Fleming, among many others. Popular with radio audiences worldwide, RNO concerts are regularly aired by National Public Radio in the United States and by the European Broadcasting Union.

*Gramophone magazine* called the first RNO CD (1991) “an awe-inspiring experience; should human beings be able to play like this?” and listed it as the best recording of Tchaikovsky’s *Pathétique* in history. Since then, the orchestra has made more than 60 recordings for Deutsche Grammophon and PentaTone Classics, distinguishing the RNO as the only Russian ensemble with long-standing relationships with these prestigious labels, as well as additional discs with many other

record companies. Conductors represented in the RNO discography include Founder and Music Director Mikhail Pletnev, Principal Guest Conductor Vladimir Jurowski, Kent Nagano, Alexander Vedernikov and Paavo Berglund.

The RNO’s recording of Prokofiev’s *Peter and the Wolf* and Beintus’s *Wolf Tracks*, conducted by Kent Nagano and narrated by Sophia Loren, Bill Clinton and Mikhail Gorbachev, received a 2004 Grammy Award, making the RNO the first Russian orchestra to win the recording industry’s highest honor. A Spanish language version narrated by Antonio Banderas was released in 2007, following a Russian version narrated by actors Oleg Tabakov and Sergei Bezrukov, with Mandarin and other editions to follow.

The orchestra’s Shostakovich cycle on PentaTone Classics is widely acclaimed as “the most exciting cycle of the Shostakovich symphonies to be put down on disc, and easily the best recorded.” (*SACD.net*)

A regular visitor to the Schleswig-Holstein, Gstaad and Rheingau festivals, the RNO is also the founding orchestra of Napa Valley Festival del Sole, Festival of the Arts BOCA in Florida, and the Singapore Sun Festival, and resident orchestra for multiple seasons of the Tuscan Sun Festival in Cortona, Italy. The RNO will launch its own annual festival in 2009, which will be held at Moscow’s Bolshoi Theater.

The RNO is unique among the principal Russian ensembles as a private institution funded with the support of individuals, corporations and foundations in Russia and throughout the world. In recognition of both its artistry and path-breaking structure, the Russian Federation recently awarded the RNO the first ever grant to a non-government orchestra.

## Mikhail Pletnev

Mikhail Pletnev was born in Archangel in 1957. After his studies at the Central Special Music School, he entered the Moscow Tchaikovsky Conservatory in 1974, where he studied with Jakob Flier and Lev Vlasenko. Aged only 21, Pletnev was the Gold Medal and First Prize winner of the 1978 Tchaikovsky International Piano Competition in Moscow. This prize earned him early international recognition. He has since appeared as soloist with the major orchestras under conductors such as Bernard Haitink, Riccardo Chailly, Valery Gergiev, Zubin Mehta, Kent Nagano, Kurt Sanderling, Christian Thielemann and Herbert Blomstedt.

In 1990, following the collapse of the Soviet system, Mikhail Pletnev was able to realize his dream of forming an orchestra independent of the government – the Russian National Orchestra. Under his artistic leadership, the RNO has become known as one of the world’s lead-

ing orchestras. Although his conducting career is primarily focused on the RNO, he also makes appearances as a guest-conductor with such prestigious orchestras as the Rotterdam Philharmonic Orchestra, the Philharmonia Orchestra, London Symphony Orchestra, City of Birmingham Symphony Orchestra, the Berliner Sinfonieorchester and the Los Angeles Philharmonic. In September 1999, Pletnev was appointed the RNO’s Conductor Laureate and his collaboration with the orchestra has continued in many of its recordings and concerts. In February 2003, he conducted the St. Petersburg Philharmonic Orchestra at the Berliner Konzerthaus for the official opening of the Russian Year of Culture in the presence of Chancellor Schroeder and President Putin. This concert was televised throughout the whole European Union.

Mikhail Pletnev’s recordings and live performances as a pianist have proved him an outstanding interpreter of an extensive repertoire. His album of Scarlatti’s Keyboard Sonatas (EMI-Virgin Classics) received a Gramophone Award in 1996. *BBC Music Magazine* called this recording “piano playing at its greatest... this performance alone would be enough to secure Pletnev a place among the greatest pianists ever known.” Together with his performance of Tchaikovsky’s Piano Concerto No. 2 and *The Seasons*, his unrivalled transcriptions for piano of Tchaikovsky’s *Nutcracker* Suite and *Sleeping Beauty* were selected for the 1998 anthology “Great Pianists of the 20th Century” (Philips Classics). Pletnev’s recording of the Third Piano Concertos by both Rachmaninoff and Prokofiev (Deutsche Grammophon) with the RNO and conductor Mstislav Rostropovich received a 2004 Grammy Award nomination. Two major events in which Mikhail Pletnev performed with Claudio Abbado and the Berlin Philharmonic Orchestra include the 1997 New Year’s Eve Concert and the Europa Konzert 2000, both of which were televised and broadcast world-wide from the Philharmonie in Berlin.

As a composer, Pletnev’s works include the *Classical* Symphony, Quintet for Piano and Strings, *Triptych* for Symphony Orchestra, *Fantasy on Kazakh Themes* for Violin and Orchestra, and *Capriccio* for Piano and Orchestra. In December 1998, the world première of his Concerto for Viola and Orchestra took place in Moscow, with Yuri Bashmet as soloist.

His stature in Russia was formally recognized in 1995, when he was awarded the First State Prize of the Russian Federation by President Yeltsin. In 2002, he again received this honour from President Putin.

