

onyx

TCHAIKOVSKY

Symphony No.6 'Pathétique'  
Souvenir de Florence

Domingo  
Hindoyan

ROYAL LIVERPOOL  
PHILHARMONIC ORCHESTRA

PYOTR ILYICH TCHAIKOVSKY 1840–1893

**Souvenir de Florence Op.70** arr. for orchestra

- |   |   |       |
|---|---|-------|
| 1 | I. Allegro con spirito  | 11.37 |
| 2 | II. Adagio cantabile e con moto<br>Eva Thorarinsdottir <i>solo violin</i> · Jonathan Aasgaard <i>solo cello</i> | 11.13 |
| 3 | III. Allegretto moderato  | 6.35  |
| 4 | IV. Allegro vivace  | 7.10  |

**Symphony No.6 in B minor Op.74 'Pathétique'**

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|---|-----------------------------------|-------|
| 5 | I. Adagio – Allegro ma non troppo | 18.53 |
| 6 | II. Allegro con grazia            | 7.22  |
| 7 | III. Allegro molto vivace         | 8.35  |
| 8 | IV. Adagio lamentoso              | 10.27 |

ROYAL LIVERPOOL PHILHARMONIC ORCHESTRA

Domingo Hindoyan

Life and work were suffocating Tchaikovsky at the start of 1890. 'For the first half of this winter,' he wrote as the new year began, 'I have had to submit to strains which have been quite inhuman, constantly travelling between [St Petersburg] and Moscow, spending all day at the rehearsal, then at the concert, straining my nervous resources to the utmost.' While a break was clearly in order, the composer had little enthusiasm for a recuperative trip abroad. He and his servant headed south for the winter, settling in Florence at the Hotel Washington by the river Arno. 'Italy, Florence – nothing gives me the slightest pleasure so far,' he reported to his brother, Modest. 'It will be fun to watch people going to the Cascino [Park] in fine weather. I'll see what happens tomorrow when I get down to work. If it doesn't go well I'll go back to Russia. I cannot live outside Russia.'

The day after arriving in Florence, Tchaikovsky began writing his tenth opera, *The Queen of Spades*, and had drafted much of its vocal–piano score by the time he left for Rome just over two months later. While his creative energy flowed freely, Florence did little to lift the composer's depression. 'I find [it] just as unappealing as ever,' he wrote to Modest in mid-March, 'and except for my rooms, and a few places in Cascino, I find everything about the place positively unpleasant.' Tchaikovsky momentarily paused composing his opera to sketch an idea for the slow movement of a string sextet that he had started and set aside almost three years earlier. He retrieved this fragmentary musical souvenir of Florence following his return to Russia: in June 1890, just five days after completing *The Queen of Spades*, he resumed work on the sextet. 'I'm composing with unbelievable effort,' he informed Modest. 'I'm hampered not by lack of ideas but by the novelty of the form. One requires six independent and at the same time homogeneous parts. This is unimaginably difficult.'

With *Souvenir de Florence*, Tchaikovsky created an ideal blend of classical form and romantic expression. Its first movement follows a clear-cut sonata structure, with a strong exposition of two contrasting themes (the first restless to the point of neurosis, the second, cast in A major, lyrical and elegant with traces of wit); an impassioned development section; a taught recapitulation, complete with an exquisite restatement of the second theme; and an intense, fiery coda. Tchaikovsky's Florentine theme rises in the Adagio after a brief yet absorbing chordal introduction; its sweet, singing nature suggests that the composer held a greater affection for the Italian city than he had so recently confided to his brother. 'The central section of this adagio,' he wrote to the violinist Eugen Albrecht in August 1890, '... should be played with an improbable *pppp*; this should be just discernible, like summer lightning.'

Although shorter than their predecessors, the last two movements of *Souvenir de Florence* are anything but slight. The Allegretto moderato's main theme, imbued with the flavour of a Russian folk melody, recurs against a strikingly diverse backdrop of string textures; the finale, meanwhile, unfolds within the frame of another sonata structure, leaner than in the first movement but no less engaging. The Allegro vivace stems from another Russian-sounding tune, which contrasts with an equally full-blooded second theme. As the Tchaikovsky scholar David Brown notes, 'in the finale by far the strongest impression is made by the two chunks of vigorous counterpoint which provide the transitions in the exposition and recapitulation'. The original sextet version of *Souvenir de Florence* received its public premiere at St Petersburg in December 1890; the Hungarian conductor Anton Seidl's transcription for string orchestra, first heard at New York's Carnegie Hall in 1893, set the precedent for subsequent orchestral arrangements of the work.

The melancholy of *Souvenir de Florence*, never far from the surface, threatens to overwhelm Tchaikovsky's Sixth Symphony. He had begun work on a symphony in E flat in May 1892 but, unhappy with its sketches, set it aside; he recycled the material the following year to form the one-movement Third Piano Concerto and the unfinished *Andante and Finale* for piano and orchestra. Tchaikovsky addressed the symphonic form one last time in February 1893. 'I destroyed the symphony which I had been composing and only partly orchestrated in the autumn...' he wrote to his nephew, Vladimir Davydov. 'During my [concert tour abroad] I had the idea for another symphony, this time with a programme, but such a programme that will remain an enigma to everyone – let them guess for themselves; the symphony shall be entitled: *A Programme Symphony* (No.6)'. The programme, he added, was so profoundly personal that while 'I was mentally composing it on my travels, I wept a great deal'.

Tchaikovsky, drawing on themes that had come to mind on tour, sketched the new symphony's first movement within a few days; he created its equally long third movement soon after, before drafting the Adagio lamentoso and, finally, the delectable Allegro con grazia. Sadness is embedded in the work's opening Adagio and is only partly lifted by the movement's major-key second theme, hallmarked by its yearning quality and imploring rhythmic energy. It was inevitable that the symphony should become associated with Fate, especially so given the appearance in the first movement of a brass chorale based on the Russian Orthodox Kontakion of the Departed, 'Give rest, O Christ, to your servant with your saints'.

Tchaikovsky's 'let them guess' remark to young 'Bob' Davydov, the symphony's dedicatee, raises intriguing possibilities in the Allegro con grazia. The movement dances along in irregular 5/4 time, like a witty waltz designed to trip unwary aristocrats at an imperial ball. Or is it, perhaps, an ironic take on the unsatisfactory nature of life itself, smooth in parts but often not? The work's third movement contains a paradox which, as David Brown notes, stems from its juxtaposition of a main theme and overarching style that would not seem misplaced in Tchaikovsky's ballet *The Nutcracker* with a structural complexity that would. The finale, a knotty sonata rondo, reflects the work's Russian title, *Pateticheskaya*, meaning 'full of pathos' or 'impassioned' as well as 'pathetic'. The descending scale motifs from the first movement, associated with Fate by many, steps forward as the principal actor in the finale to carry the composer's tears.

As he laboured on orchestrating his new score, Tchaikovsky wrote to his brother Anatoly: 'I'm very proud of the symphony, and I think it's the best of my compositions'. He underlined the point soon after in a letter penned shortly before the work's public premiere in St Petersburg in October 1893. 'I think it will be successful,' he observed; 'it is rare for me to write anything with such love and enthrallment.' Tchaikovsky died nine days after conducting the first performance of the 'Pathétique', almost certainly carried to the grave by the cholera pandemic then raging across the Russian Empire.

**Andrew Stewart**



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