

## ASO Program Notes

# Symphony No. 4 in F Minor

Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky (1840 – 1893)

Tchaikovsky was very much a troubled soul and spent much of his life fighting depression brought about by his extremely insecure nature and conflict over his homosexuality. During the year that the Symphony No. 4 was composed Tchaikovsky cycled through bouts of extreme melancholy and manic optimism. The year, 1877, included the appearance of a patron, and of a former student whom he felt compelled to marry, leading to a suicide attempt and a psychological breakdown. His relationship with his patron, Nadezhda van Meck, was perfect. By mutual agreement, they corresponded but never met, and Tchaikovsky loved the combination of intellectual intimacy and physical distance. His relationship with Antonina Milyukova, herself unstable and to whom he felt a physical aversion, resulted in agony to the point of desperation and longing for death. It has been speculated that in an attempt to hide his homosexuality, he married as a “cover”, but the result was disastrous. His wife was totally ignorant of music and Tchaikovsky escaped to a town called Kamenka, where he lost himself in composing the Symphony No. 4. Upon returning to Moscow he attempted suicide by wading into the icy water of the Moscow River, hoping to contract a fatal bout of pneumonia. It didn't work and he broke down, requiring psychiatric care. He finally persuaded his brother to help him obtain a divorce. Antonina refused and the divorce never actually took place, but they separated and Antonina died in a mental institution 21 years later.

The 4<sup>th</sup> symphony, sketched out during that disastrous year, was dedicated to his patron. At her request he provided a kind of program for the work, attempting to explain the emotional content of his work. With the working theme of “Fate”, he says that the first movement contains the seed, or chief thought, of the work in the brass fanfare. “The main idea is Fate, the inexorable power that hinders our search for happiness.” It describes the depression and hopelessness one feels when grim reality kills the fugitive dreams of happiness. The second movement captures another form of sadness, the melancholic feeling that overpowers one alone at night. Life has lost its allure. The Scherzo suggests “fleeting glimpses and indistinct shadows” and the mood alternates between happiness and despair. The finale suggests “if you cannot find joy in your own soul, look to others,” then realizes that Fate reminds us that while others rejoice the world is still cloaked in sorrow. He ends by saying that if we can rejoice in the happiness of others there is still some sense of being alive.

The work finishes with one final reminder from the fateful horns of the opening, but resolves in a triumphant and heroic ending, suggesting that, by intention, life goes on.

Beryl McHenry