

Peter Ilyich Tchaikovsky

1840 - 1893

Tchaikovsky was never a happy man. He always felt unworthy and was afraid that if he became close to others they would learn what he was really like and reject him. After hearing a piece of his which made him weep, Leo Tolstoy wanted to become his friend, but Tchaikovsky was afraid to spend time with him: he was sure that the author of *War and Peace* would see right through him and despise him.

Peter was born May 7, 1840, one of the middle children in the family of a civil servant. A sensitive child, he quickly showed strong feeling for music. Often after playing the piano he was too excited to be able to sleep.

At eight his family tried to send him to boarding school, but he fell ill, and returned home. At ten they tried again: his mother left him at the School of Jurisprudence in St. Petersburg, a school for future Russian civil servants. Seeing his mother leave him was one of the worst moments of Tchaikovsky's life. Perhaps he felt it as a rejection. Four years later she died of cholera in a great epidemic; her death was a loss he felt all his life.

School in St. Petersburg offered some advantages, although great loneliness. He learned more about music, and was able to see operas. *Don Giovanni* overwhelmed him, and for him Mozart was always the greatest composer of all: he called Mozart "the Christ of Music."

After graduating in 1859, Tchaikovsky worked as a government clerk, without much interest in his job. He continued studying music. In 1862 Tchaikovsky decided that music would be his career. Bravely he resigned his secure job, and became a student at Anton Rubinstein's new St. Petersburg Conservatory, teaching to get money. After he completed his studies, Anton's brother Nikolay invited Tchaikovsky to come teach at his Moscow Conservatory. For twelve years he taught there to make enough money to support his composing.

Gradually he found his style and his subjects. He was not a precocious composer: perhaps his first fully successful score was his *Romeo and Juliet Overture* of 1870. Tchaikovsky found that a story or subject inspired his best music, and often, as here, the best stories for his purposes were those in which love was crushed by a hostile fate, and in which he could find a heroine whose plight inspired him. Much of his best work was done for the theatre — for operas and ballets. Although Tchaikovsky felt that there was something tawdry about the stage, he found it irresistible. There he had a disguise for himself; there he could express his emotions in those of his characters with no need for disguise.

While he was succeeding as a musician, Tchaikovsky was lonely and unhappy as a man. He found his only self-justification in his work. "The thought that I am good-for-nothing, that only musical work redeems my defects and raises me to manhood in its truest sense, begins to overwhelm and torture me," he once wrote. As a result, he was almost a compulsive composer, and set apart time regularly every day to compose.

But his work was not enough to fill his life. He wanted a home and a family. He was working on his greatest opera, an adaptation of Pushkin's *Eugene Onegin*. Tatiana, the heroine, offers her love to the egotistical Onegin, who cruelly rejects her. As he was composing this story, one of his female students wrote Tchaikovsky offering him her love. He felt he could hardly be as cruel as Onegin: before he quite knew what had happened the unbalanced girl, Antonina Ivanovna Milyukova, was announcing that she would commit suicide if he didn't marry her. Tchaikovsky passively wrote a friend "the story of what has happened to me," and said, "I decided that I could not avoid my destiny and that Fate itself had decreed my meeting with this girl."

If Fate had, Fate was out to get him. Antonina was stupid and not wholly sane. She believed that all men were in love with her. The marriage took place, and was a disaster. Tchaikovsky tried to be kind, but felt trapped. He was desperate enough to wade into the icy Moscow River; when he was unable to drown himself, he hoped at least to get pneumonia. This failed; he had a brother send him a telegram calling him away, and fled. He was never able to live with Antonina, who persecuted him for the rest of his life, refusing to divorce him, threatening to expose him or move in with him, and demanding money. Ultimately she went mad and died in an insane asylum.

Tchaikovsky was rescued from the breakdown that followed his escape by his great patroness, Madame Nadejda von Meck, the wealthy widow of a railway owner. A shy recluse, her greatest passion was music, and Tchaikovsky's dissolved her into emotion. After she commissioned a piece from him, they began a correspondence which finally added up to 1100 letters. She protected him, gave him a pension, and acted as a sort of second mother to him. They never met, except by accident, even though they vacationed in the same towns, where she would rent and decorate his apartments. They even arranged for her son to marry his niece; but their own relationship, although the deepest emotional one in either's life, remained one of letters.

Three years before Tchaikovsky's death Madame von Meck broke off their correspondence, for reasons not entirely clear. He never fully recovered from this rejection, and her name was part of his murmuring as he lay delirious on his deathbed. He died of cholera November 6, 1893.

But the money she gave him over the years freed him from bondage at the Conservatory, and her encouragement led to his finest works. He was never rich, despite the popularity of his works, since he was careless with money. Scholars estimate that he gave away about half the money that ever came into his hands: perhaps he felt that he had to buy peoples' affection. Still, he kept enough to afford a house in the countryside he loved, between Moscow and St. Petersburg. After his death his faithful valet Alexis, who inherited his furniture, bought the house and turned it into a museum to honor his master. Tchaikovsky, whom Camille Saint-Saëns once called "the kindest and gentlest of men," was evidently one man who was a hero to his valet.



From a production by Alexandre Benois of *The Nutcracker Ballet*



TCHAIKOVSKY, 1886

In the period just before the war Ravel was a prominent part of the international group of new composers. He wrote his ballet *Daphnis et Chloé* for Diaghilev's *Ballet Russe*, and through Diaghilev met young Igor Stravinsky, with whom he reorchestrated a Mussorgsky opera for Diaghilev. Ravel was a masterful orchestrator, one of the great ones of modern times. His orchestration of Mussorgsky's "Pictures at an Exhibition" is still heard more frequently than the original piano piece. He enjoyed orchestration so much that at least half his own works exist in more than one form: he would reorchestrate them for fun.

Odd that such a great orchestrator should fail in a competition. After having come up to the Paris Conservatory in 1889, at fourteen, Ravel had a successful career there. By the time he was twenty he was composing and had found his own characteristic sound. Over the next ten years he tried five times to win the Conservatory's *Prix de Rome*, hallowed by such winners as Berlioz and Debussy. By 1905, his last attempt, he was thought of as foremost among the younger musicians, and had published some major works; but the jury of critics eliminated him before the finals. The winner is now an unknown. This decision precipitated a *scandale*; the Director of the Conservatory had to leave, and it was reorganized on more modern lines.

Both Ravel's personality and his musical style were established early, and never changed. A short trim man, something of a dandy, Ravel was very self-contained. His emotions were never on public display. People enjoyed being in his company, but he lived by himself. Perhaps the deepest emotional tie in his life was his love for his mother, from whose death in 1917 he never entirely recovered. She was of Basque origin, which accounts in part for the strong Spanish influence in Ravel's music, as does his having grown up near the Spanish border following his birth in Ciboure, March 7, 1875.

Béla Bartók

(1881-1945)

Like Sibelius, Béla Bartók was a musician in a small country just beginning to establish its national identity and demand a national art. When Bartók was born March 25, 1881, in Nagyszentmiklós, the town was part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. It is now in Rumania. His mother spoke German, the language of the Empire's rulers, but Bartók thought of himself as a Hungarian, and his Hungarian patriotism guided his actions through his life.

Bartók's family were musical. His father, the principal of the agricultural college in Nagyszentmiklós, had founded a town orchestra, for which he learned to play the cello as there were no cellists in town. In 1880 he married Paula Voit, also a teacher, a good pianist. Béla was their first child. Frail in health all his life, he suffered many childhood illnesses: at one point in his early years eczema so disfigured him that when visitors came, he was locked away as too unsightly. Perhaps this experience had something to do with his becoming a rather unsociable man.

Béla developed an interest in music early. For his fifth birthday he was given what he wanted most—piano lessons. His talent developed. But in 1888 his young father died. His mother had to return to teaching to support her two children. She moved from town to town, trying to find good musical training for Béla. As they moved, Béla was exposed to different sorts of folk music in different regions, an experience important to his later career.

His first public performance came at the age of eleven, when he played part of a Beethoven sonata and a piece he had written at the age of eight. Called "The Course of the Danube," it is full of naive patriotism: its movements' titles include "The Danube is happy because it is coming to Hungary," and its logical sequel, "It is sad because it is leaving Hungary."

In 1899 Bartók rejected the chance to study at the Vienna Conservatory in favor of Budapest's Academy. He preferred to remain in Hungary; also he wanted the chance to study piano with István Thomán, a pupil of Liszt, one of Bartók's heroes. At this stage of his life Bartók became an extreme nationalist. He went about in Hungarian peasant costume, and wrote his mother, "Everyone, on reaching

maturity, must decide for what ideal he will fight, so that all his work, all his actions, can be directed to that end. For my part I will devote every part of my life, always and in every way, to one good." He wrote a "Kossuth" symphony, honoring the Hungarian hero of the 1848 revolution against Austria. It was rather like a bad Strauss tone poem, but the patriotic audiences loved it.

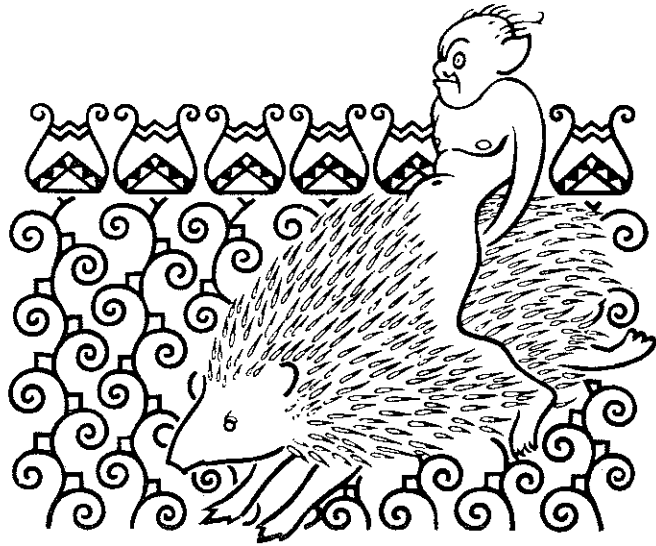
This rather simple-minded nationalism led to a new interest for Bartók. In 1905 he began collecting folk songs in the countryside. In doing so he met another collector, his fellow-composer Zoltán Kodály (1882-1967). They became friends and worked together, carrying about an Edison phonograph into whose horn they persuaded peasants to sing, engraving their songs on the wax Edison cylinders.

Out of these explorations Bartók found both a career and his own idiom as a composer. He collected not only Hungarian folk songs, but folk songs of the other nationalities of the area. He learned Rumanian for this task, and ultimately collected 3400 Rumanian songs alone, as well as the Hungarian, Slovak, and Turkish songs he found. All these were still available in the last days of the peasant oral culture, before radio replaced homemade music with the same product for everyone. In the course of his lifetime, Bartók spent more time on his folk songs than on his own music, and acquired a worldwide reputation as an ethnomusicologist.



Béla Bartók and Zoltán Kodály, after Mrs. Kodály, 1921

BÉLA BARTÓK



Folk music also showed him the way to his own style. He did not write fake folk songs, or quote real ones in his work, but in this music, “devoid of sentimentality and superfluous ornament,” he found an idiom in which he could contribute original work to the classical forms.

In 1907 he was appointed to succeed his old teacher Thomán as advanced piano instructor at the Budapest Academy, a post he held until 1934. Kodály was a colleague there. Bartók taught well and conscientiously; his female pupils had a tendency to fall in love with him. In 1909 he married one, sixteen-year-old Márta Ziegler.

By this time, he was writing some important music, but had not yet found an audience for it. When World War I came, Bartók was rejected for service: he was unhealthy and weighed less than a hundred pounds. During the war he had a popular breakthrough when an Italian conductor managed to make a success out of his “unplayable” ballet-pantomime *The Wooden Prince*. After the war he survived the communist revolution and conservative counterrevolution, in Hungary, and the breakup of his marriage. In 1923 he remarried, again a sixteen-year-old pupil, Ditta Pásztor. In the following years he wrote many of his best works.

As another war approached, Bartók was increasingly unhappy with his country’s position. Its middle class supported a Fascist government. “I am really ashamed to belong to this class,” he wrote. Hungary seemed likely to join with Hitler and Mussolini. “There is the imminent danger that Hungary will also surrender to this system of robbery and murder. How I could then continue to live or—which amounts to the same thing—work in such a country is quite inconceivable.” Should he leave? “Even in the best of circumstances, earning my daily bread in some foreign land would cause me such enormous difficulties and spiritual pain . . . that I cannot think of it. And then I have my mother here: should I leave her in the last years of her life? No, I cannot do that!” When his mother died in December, 1939, he felt great grief, but now was free to leave.

He and his wife arrived in New York in October, 1940. He was able to work at Columbia University, analyzing the Milman Parry collection of Yugoslavian folk songs. But he received few offers for concerts. He was unhappy away from Hungary, and depressed by “the destruction of Europe (both in terms of human lives and works of art).” He was often ill.

By 1942 it was clear that he had leukemia. ASCAP (the American Society of Composers, Authors, and Publishers) generously paid his medical expenses, and sent him to Saranac Lake, N.Y. and Asheville, N.C. He continued working as he grew weaker, and completed a commission for Serge Koussevitsky, the Concerto for Orchestra, during one remission. He did not want to die: “The trouble is that I have to go with so much still to say,” he complained. He died in New York City September 26, 1945.

A quiet man, rather unsociable, Bartók spoke little, and rarely about himself or his work. He was unwilling to engage in self-promotion, or to compromise his high standards. His life as well as his music was governed by his fierce integrity, and that in the end was the ideal for which he fought, more important to him than even Hungary.