Beginning in July 1861, Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky took a three-month leave of absence from his bureaucratic job at the Ministry of Justice in St. Petersburg to serve as translator for a trip undertaken by one of his father’s business colleagues. This opened his horizons to the world beyond Russia as they wended their way through Berlin, Hamburg, Cologne, Antwerp, Brussels, London, and Paris, with Tchaikovsky immersing himself in concerts and theatrical performances along the way.

He returned home just as the recently founded Russian Musical Society was beginning its autumn courses, and he signed up to study music theory while continuing with his day job. Within a year the Society’s courses crystallized into a new institution, the St. Petersburg Conservatory, operating under the direction of Anton Rubinstein. The school boasted a faculty that included the pianist Theodor Leschetizky, the violinist Henryk Wieniawski, and the composition professor Nikolai Zaremba (who oversaw Tchaikovsky’s progress in that area).

Tchaikovsky did not at first display extraordinary talent as a Conservatory student, but he made steady progress, and by the time he graduated, in 1865, he had developed into a composer to reckon with, one who boasted a polished technique and who seemed to have something distinctive to express. At the age of 25 he had glimpsed the cosmopolitan music world and, in Anton Rubinstein, had acquired a mentor who might help him navigate it. Anton’s younger brother, Nikolai Rubinstein, also a pianist, set about founding a conservatory in Moscow to complement Anton’s establishment in St. Petersburg. So it was that in 1865 Nikolai traveled to St. Petersburg to recruit faculty, bringing back Anton’s protégé, Tchaikovsky.

That first year in Moscow was dominated by work on his First Symphony. His brother Modest would later insist that no work of Tchaikovsky’s ever underwent such a difficult gestation (covering a full nine months). A late-summer visit to St. Petersburg slowed him down further, since both Anton Rubinstein and Zaremba proved highly critical of the work-in-progress. When the symphony was finally complete, it was unveiled piecemeal. Nikolai Rubinstein initially led the Scherzo on its own, and two months later the Adagio and Scherzo together, before finally conducting the entire symphony in February 1868, when, the composer reported, “it scored a great success.”

In Short

Born: May 7, 1840, at Votkinsk, in the district of Viatka, Russia
Died: November 6, 1893, in St. Petersburg
Work composed: March–November 1866, revised in 1874
World premiere: Scherzo, premiered December 22, 1866, at a concert of the Russian Musical Society in Moscow; Adagio and Scherzo, first played February 23, 1867, at a Russian Musical Society concert in St. Petersburg; complete work, February 15, 1868, at a Russian Musical Society concert in Moscow; Nikolai Rubinstein conducted each premiere. The revised version was introduced on December 1, 1883, at a Russian Musical Society concert in Moscow, Max Erdmannsdörfer, conductor
New York Philharmonic premiere: February 7, 1896, Anton Seidl, conductor; this marked the work’s US Premiere
Most recent New York Philharmonic performance: May 12, 2018, Nikolaj Znaider, conductor
Estimated duration: ca. 43 minutes
Tchaikovsky harbored a fondness for this early effort throughout his life, referring to it as “a sin of my sweet youth,” and in 1874 he took the trouble to revise it, reining in what he apparently considered youthful indiscretions. “It is in many ways very immature,” he wrote to his patron, Nadezhda von Meck, in 1883, “yet fundamentally it has more substance and is better than many of my other more mature works.” The Winter Dreams (Zimnie grëzy) of the subtitle, explicitly alluding to the headings of the first two movements, may have had some autobiographical import, but the references are vague, no explicit program survives, and the listener is left to approach this as “absolute music” pure and simple.

**Instrumentation:** two flutes and piccolo, two oboes, two clarinets, two bassoons, four horns, two trumpets, three trombones, tuba, timpani, cymbals, bass drum, and strings.

— J.M.K.

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**Father and Son**

Ilya Tchaikovsky, the composer’s father, was a conservative figure who greatly valued appearances and propriety, yet he was not rigid in imposing his own aspirations on his offspring. In 1860 Tchaikovsky reported, in a self-doubting letter to his sister:

At supper my musical talent was discussed. Papa assures me that it isn’t too late for me to become a professional musician. It would be splendid if that were so — but the point is this: if there is talent in me, it is still most likely that it’s impossible to develop it by now.

There is no question that Ilya, who was serving as director of the St. Petersburg Technological Institute at the time, would have been delighted if Pyotr had continued on a career path in administration. Fortunately for posterity, he was far more supportive than many a mid-19th-century paterfamilias would have been. As Tchaikovsky later recalled in a letter to his patron, Nadezhda von Meck:

I cannot recall without tender emotion how my father treated my flight from the Ministry of Justice to the St. Petersburg Conservatoire. ... Although it pained him that I had not fulfilled those hopes which he had placed upon my career in the civil service, although he could not but grieve, seeing that I was voluntarily impoverishing myself in order to become a musician, yet never in a single word did he make me feel that he was dissatisfied with me. He inquired about my intentions and plans with nothing but the warmest interest, and in every way gave his approval. I am very, very indebted to him.

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The Tchaikovsky family, ca. 1848, with young Pyotr at far left