



TCHAIKOVSKY'S PATHÉTIQUE

Sunday, Apr. 28, 2024 @ 3 p.m.

Shiyeon Sung, conductor
Pacific Symphony

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Performance at the Segerstrom Center for the Arts
Renée and Henry Segerstrom Concert Hall & Lobby

PROGRAM

TCHAIKOVSKY

Symphony No. 6 in B minor, Op. 74
("Pathétique")

Adagio - Allegro non troppo

Allegro con grazia

Allegro molto vivace

Finale: Adagio lamentoso



ABOUT THE CONDUCTOR

South Korean conductor Shiyeon Sung is the first female conductor out of that country to make the leap to the podium of internationally renowned orchestras, including the Royal Concertgebouw Orchestra, the Orchestre Philharmonique de Radio France, the Los Angeles Philharmonic, the Konzerthaus Orchestra Berlin, and the Bamberg Symphony.



Born in Pusan, South Korea, Sung won various prizes as a pianist in youth competitions. From 2001 to 2006, she studied orchestral conducting with Rolf Reuter at the Hanns Eisler School of Music in Berlin and continued her education with advanced conducting studies with Jorma Panula at the Royal College of Music in Stockholm.

When she was appointed assistant conductor at the Boston Symphony Orchestra in 2007, her reputation as one of the most exciting emerging talents on the international music circuit was already secure: shortly before, Sung had won the International Conductors' Competition Sir Georg Solti and the Gustav Mahler Conductors' Competition in Bamberg. During her three-year tenure in Boston, she began a close collaboration with the Seoul Philharmonic Orchestra and conducted their season-opening concert in 2007. In 2009, the orchestra established an associate conductor's position especially for her, which she held until 2013.

Sung was chief conductor of the Gyeonggi Philharmonic Orchestra from 2014 until the end of 2017, during which time she led the orchestra to international success. Following a performance in 2015 at the Philharmonie Berlin, in 2017 Sung and her orchestra were the first Asian orchestra to be invited for a guest appearance at the Musikfest Berlin, the renowned international orchestra festival. Their recording of Mahler's Symphony No. 5 for Decca documents Sung's outstanding work with the group of predominantly young orchestral musicians, for which she was awarded the Musical Performance Prize 2017 from the Daewon Cultural Foundation. After her departure from Gyeonggi, Sung relocated to Berlin where she now resides, but remains a popular guest in her home country and regularly returns to the Korea National Opera and the Seoul Philharmonic Orchestra.

Sung's 2023-24 season kicked off at the Hollywood Bowl in a concert with the Los Angeles Philharmonic. Following her successful debut with the Bavarian Radio Symphony Orchestra in their Musica Viva series in July 2022 season, she was immediately re-invited for subscription concerts in November 2023. She returned to the Royal Philharmonic for five concerts in February 2024 following her successful debut in December 2022. In Asia, she will appear with the Hankyung and the Daejeon Philharmonic, the KBS Symphony Orchestra and the Kanagawa Philharmonic.

PROGRAM NOTES

Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky

Symphony No. 6 in B minor, Op. 74, "Pathétique"

Born: May 7, 1840 in Votkinsk, Russian Empire

Died: Nov. 6, 1893 in St. Petersburg, Russian Empire

Composed: 1893

Premiered: Oct. 28, 1893 in St. Petersburg, with the composer conducting

Most recent Pacific Symphony performance: Oct. 19, 2019, with Carl St.Clair conducting

Instrumentation: three flutes including piccolo, two oboes, two clarinets, two bassoons, four horns, two trumpets, three trombones, one tuba, timpani, percussion, and strings

Approximate duration: 46 minutes



Was it just an unfortunate twist of fate that Tchaikovsky drank a glass of cholera-contaminated water five days after conducting the premiere of his Symphony No. 6? Was he unconsciously punishing himself for the sexual impulses that tormented him, perhaps even succumbing to an urge to die? Or did he, in fact, commit suicide to conceal his alleged affair with the nephew of Duke Stenbock Thurmor? We'll never know the answer, but our awareness of his inner conflicts can add depth to our experience in listening to his impassioned "Pathétique."

Cholera was rife in Saint Petersburg in 1893, and citizens throughout the city were boiling their drinking water. It's hard to imagine Tchaikovsky, who always fretted and feared the worst, letting his guard down offhandedly. He worried about his image both as a composer whose reputation would survive him and as a public figure in Russian society. And he knew that since Beethoven, the symphony was a form that serious composers reserved for big ideas and programmatic music that might have a narrative line or an intellectual agenda connected with the philosophical ideas of greatest concern to them. For Tchaikovsky, his repressed homosexuality and the possibility of marriage were among these ideas. Dangerous as homosexuality was in that time and place—punishable by exile to Siberia—it seems likely that he was more concerned with appearances, and saw marriage as his chance for an outwardly normal life. Fifteen years earlier, in 1877, he had married a 16-year-old student, Antonina Miliukhova, who was infatuated with him. The marriage was an unmitigated disaster, plunging Tchaikovsky into such unbearable tension that he could not bear to be near her. In one close encounter when they found themselves in the same room, they passed without exchanging a word.

By 1892, when he was working on early sections of a sixth symphony in E-flat Major, Tchaikovsky was one of the most famous composers in the world—a man whose fame redounded to the glory of his homeland, as he had hoped it would. But at age 53, his struggles with self-image and sexual identity were no closer to resolution. Musicologists' analyses of his agonized homosexual relationships are speculative,

but it's difficult to escape some obvious conclusions about his conflicted relationship with his nephew Bob Davydov, with whom he was in love: Davydov's encouragement and understanding were indispensable to the self-doubting Tchaikovsky, but the younger man's very presence in the composer's life was a temptation and a reminder of feelings he was trying to suppress. How could he continue to craft a symphony that was planned to be highly programmatic, and thus self-revealing? At an impasse and feeling that his creative resources were spent, Tchaikovsky halted work on the E-flat Major draft in December 1892—a decision that felt not like surrender, but liberation. Within two months he began an entirely new approach to his Sixth symphony, and the ideas came pouring forth. He drafted its first section in only four days and could clearly imagine the rest. Six months later, his work on the symphony was complete.

Tchaikovsky intended his Symphony No. 6 as a programmatic work, and listening to it convinces us that the program is specific and detailed, yet the details remain unknown. He wrote to his nephew that it would "remain a mystery—let them guess." Today, we are still guessing. The sound of this symphony gives us a sense of inchoate longing: somber, melancholy, and yearning by turns. The ovation that greeted Tchaikovsky when he took the podium in October 1893 to lead the premiere performance was not matched once the symphony ended, when the audience was left to reflect on the secrets of this moody masterpiece. Today, it is esteemed as one of Tchaikovsky's most eloquent expressions of disappointed hopes and the ache for personal fulfillment—recurrent themes in earlier works such as his opera *Eugene Onegin*.

The symphony's forte passages suggest the gravity of judgment rather than triumph, while the softer passages—which dwindle down to a Guinness-record-worthy marking of "pppppp"—communicate agonized introspection. These dynamics left Tchaikovsky's audience with a very different listening experience than they expected, and prompted the composer's brother Modest to propose "Pathétique" as a name for the symphony.

If the symphony offers respite, it is in its interior movements: the lilt of the second movement, labeled a waltz, but actually rendered in a tricky 5/4 rhythm; and the third movement, which includes a blaring march that gleams with brass. This movement has all the ingredients for a sense of triumph except triumph itself. It leaves an impression of ironic disappointment, as if it were a critique of the triumphant finale that resolves Tchaikovsky's Fourth Symphony stated from a vantage point of greater experience.

Tchaikovsky famously said that he had put his "whole soul" into the "Pathétique." We may never know the demons that inhabited that soul, but we can hear the tortured sincerity of his feelings. For better or worse, those feelings ended in death nine days after he conducted the symphony's premiere.

Michael Clive is a cultural reporter living in the Litchfield Hills of Connecticut. He is program annotator for Pacific Symphony and has written numerous articles for magazines and newspapers in the U.S. and U.K. and hundreds of program notes for orchestras and opera companies. Operahound.com