

Listen4 listening guides

A brief guide to listening to

Tchaikovsky's Symphony No. 6, "Pathétique"

This outline serves as a listening guide, or "road map," through a work being performed today. The intention is to help you follow along and enjoy it in more depth. We welcome you to email us with your reactions at announcements@aspenmusic.org. Now ... let the music begin!

In 1893, the Russian composer Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky premiered his Symphony No. 6, a work that initially received a lukewarm reception but is now a favorite of orchestra audiences and beloved for its emotional expressiveness. He originally gave it the enigmatic title "A Program Symphony." (Program music is written to evoke a specific story, place, or idea.) So clearly Tchaikovsky wanted us to know there was a story behind his Sixth Symphony—but he did not reveal what it was.

After the work's premiere and Tchaikovsky's close-to-follow death, his brother Modest suggested re-titling the piece "Pathétique." This has only heightened the public's curiosity about what inspired such passionate music.

1

First Movement: Slow, then fast—but not too fast (in Italian: *Adagio-Allegro non troppo*)

"Let them guess," Tchaikovsky famously said about "Pathétique," daring listeners to propose entirely subjective interpretations of the music. Listen for the various moods he introduces throughout this first movement, which is about twice as long as those that follow, and think of what the adjoining narrative might be. Also wonder what Tchaikovsky was expressing when he wrote the whisper-soft bassoon solo followed by shocking fortissimo (meaning "very loud" in Italian) chords played by the entire ensemble.

2

Second Movement: Quick, with grace (in Italian: *Allegro con grazia*)

Listen for the unconventional beat in this movement, which reminds us of a waltz, but isn't. A traditional waltz has three beats per measure (you can feel the rhythm simply by counting out the beat: ONE two three, ONE two three...). Here, however, Tchaikovsky throws us a curve by composing with five beats per measure. See if you can count it out yourself. The result has some of the sweep of a waltz, but harbors an uneasy edge.

3

Third Movement: Fast and lively (in Italian: *Allegro molto vivace*)

Listen for the triumphant finish of this energetic march, which could nearly trick someone into believing the symphony is over.

4

Fourth Movement: Slow and mournful, then at a walking pace (In Italian: *Adagio lamentoso-Andante*)

Finally, listen for the return to an *adagio* (meaning "slow" in Italian) tempo, an unusual and striking feature for a symphony written at the time. (Symphonies traditionally wrapped up with a fast fourth movement.) That Tchaikovsky was so intentional about ending the work with a lament intensifies the emotions swirling around this work for him, and for the audience.