

Pyotr Tchaikovsky loved his mother country so much that he kissed Russia on a map of Europe as a young boy. His colorful music combines Russian folk tunes and idioms with Western forms. Although a composer of symphonies and operas, he is best known for his ballet suites, *The Nutcracker Suite* and *Swan Lake*.

Pyotr was born into a middle-class family in 1840 when Russia was still governed by kings known as *tsars*. He was an affectionate child who loved his family. Fanny Duerbach, a Frenchwoman who was his first teacher, noticed his sensitivity and called him "a child of porcelain." He kept in close contact with Sasha, his older sister, and Modest and Anatoly, his younger twin brothers, throughout his life. The boy showed high intelligence, reading both French and German at the age of six.

Tchaikovsky's father was a mining engineer who lived in Votkinsk in Central Russia. He bought his son an orchestrion and paid for piano lessons. Once Fanny found Pyotr crying and unable to sleep after hearing music at a party. "Oh this music, this music! Take it away," he cried. He often slipped away from lessons to improvise on the piano.

The family went through two years of upheaval, while Pyotr's father moved around Russia to work. In 1850, Pyotr's mother, Aleksandra, took him to St. Petersburg to enroll in the School of Jurisprudence. Pyotr felt homesick and chased his mother's carriage down the street. But eventually the entire family settled in St. Petersburg.

Tchaikovsky attended school from 1852 to 1859. Here he met Herman Laroche, who remembered him as a well-liked student. After graduating, he got a job as a clerk in a law firm. In his spare time he went to operas and ballets and socialized. Finally, it was time to make his dream of being a musician a reality. In 1862, at the age of 22, he enrolled in the St. Petersburg Conservatory run by the pianist, Anton Rubenstein, who was to become a friend and his teacher. He quickly learned how to write well in every genre.

From 1866 to 1877 Tchaikovsky lived in Moscow. He had become a professor of theory at the Moscow Conservatory, run by Anton's brother, Nikolai. Although he disliked teaching, which interfered with composition, his first ten years in Moscow were very fruitful. In 1866 he wrote his First Symphony, and in 1872 he wrote his Second Symphony which has Russian folk themes in three of its movements. The famous First Piano Concerto was completed, and the ballet music for *Swan Lake* in 1876 was written at his sister's estate. His first opera *Voyevoda* was composed in 1869 and he wrote another opera *Oprichnik* in 1870. Tchaikovsky was also a music critic for two Moscow newspapers.

Russian composers were trying to develop a distinctively Russian music.



Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky (cont.)

Five composers led this movement, including Modest Mussorgsky, who wrote the opera *Boris Godunov*, and Mily Balakirev. They were known as the "Mighty Handful" because there are five fingers on a hand. In 1869, Tchaikovsky met Balakirev, who encouraged him to write music for *Romeo and Juliet*. The fantasy-overture was completed in 1869 and is one of his most popular works.

Tchaikovsky enjoyed traveling. During his summers off from teaching, he visited Italy, France and Germany, but often seemed homesick for Russia. He saw Bizet's *Carmen* in Paris and Wagner's *Ring* cycle at Bayreuth. His sister Sasha had married in 1860 and lived in Kamenka in the Ukraine. Whenever Tchaikovsky needed a place to rest and recuperate, he stayed at his sister's estate.

The events of 1877 were traumatic. He had been working on the opera *Eugene Onegin* based on a verse novel written by Alexander Pushkin, one of Russia's great poets. In the opera, a young maiden, Tatyana, writes a letter declaring her love to Eugene Onegin. While Tchaikovsky was working on the opera, a former student, Antonina Milyukova, wrote and told him she was in love with him. It was a coincidence that struck Tchaikovsky.

The composer decided to marry her. Perhaps he was swept away by the opera he was working on, or perhaps he simply thought he should settle down. He wanted to have a family and was in financial trouble, while Antonina was coming into an inheritance.

The marriage lasted only two weeks. Tchaikovsky never divorced his wife, but separated from her permanently. He suffered a nervous breakdown, was unable to compose, and traveled restlessly in the years that followed.

Late in 1876, another woman came into his life, who was to be a prominent figure for the next fourteen years. Nadezhda von Meck was a wealthy widow and a great fan of Tchaikovsky's music. She began sending him a regular allowance in the fall of 1877. The two agreed never to meet and wrote to each other regularly.

Von Meck's allowance allowed Tchaikovsky to leave the Conservatory in 1878. He was becoming increasingly frustrated with trying to teach and compose at the same time. Perhaps Nikolai's harsh criticism of his First Piano Concerto and other pieces had soured their friendship, for the composer was deeply sensitive and remembered old slights.

During the next six years, he spent almost two years abroad, mainly in Switzerland and Italy. In Switzerland, he completed the Violin Concerto, another piece with many Russian folk themes. In 1880 he commemorated the defeat of Napoleon's army in Russia with the *Festival 1812 Overture*.

His fame was growing overseas. The conductor Hans von Bulow began studying Tchaikovsky's music in the mid-1870s and conducted the First Piano Concerto in Boston in 1875 and Germany in 1879. Tchaikovsky's work became known in France after his work was published in Paris, and his own conducting career flourished in the late 1880s. In London, the Piano Concerto had been well received in 1876.

Feeling a need to settle down, Tchaikovsky rented a house in Klin, about 90

kilometers from Moscow, in 1885. He would live near Klin, when he was not traveling, for the rest of his life. He met up again with Balakirev, under whose encouragement he wrote the *Manfred Symphony* in 1886. In his later years, the ease of composing returned. In 1889 Tchaikovsky wrote music for the ballet *Sleeping Beauty* in 40 days, then left after its premiere to write the opera *The Queen of Spades* in 43 days.

But his composing success was mixed with uneasiness with his own waning health (he was ill much of 1886 and 1887). Then, unaccountably, Madame von Meck broke off her relationship with him by letter in 1890. Her family may have disapproved of her patronage. In any case, the composer was hurt by the loss of her friendship, and her refusal to give any cogent explanation.

By this time, Tchaikovsky was earning enough money through his conducting and composing. In 1891 he traveled to the United States for the inaugural celebration to open Carnegie Hall. He was working on the *The Nutcracker Suite*. Americans welcomed him with open arms, which helped to ease the grief of the recent death of his sister Sasha. "I am ten times as famous here as in Europe" he wrote to Modest. The composer enjoyed a trip to Niagara Falls and the many balls given in his honor. Another event which gave him pleasure was receiving an honorary doctorate from Cambridge University in 1893.

Tchaikovsky's final symphony, *Symphony No. 6 in B minor* was completed in 1893. Known as the *Pathetique Symphony*, it was dedicated to Sasha's son, Bob Davidov, of whom the composer was very fond and whom he treated like a favorite son. A week after its first performance, Tchaikovsky died at the age of 53. He died of cholera after drinking a glass of unboiled water.

Tchaikovsky wrote six symphonies, eleven operas and three ballets, as well as songs, overtures and chamber music. His great triumph was to reconcile Western forms with Russian music such as folk dances. He is known as the great synthesizer of Russian and Western music.

More on Tchaikovsky's Music

Swan Lake

The story of *Swan Lake* appears in many European fairy tales. A young Prince, Siegfried, must choose a bride. Not wanting to make up his mind, he decides to go hunting. He almost shoots a white swan in the forest, but she turns into a beautiful woman. She says her name is Odette, and that she is an enchanted princess. An evil magician, Von Rothbart, holds her and her swan maidens captive. The spell can only be broken if someone will fall in love with her.

Siegfried and Odette dance the famous White Swan *pas-de-deux* and fall in love. The next day, Rothbart brings his daughter Odile to Prince Siegfried's ball. Through magic, Odile looks exactly like Odette in order to fool Prince Siegfried. (In fact, the part of Odile is usually played by the same ballerina who plays Odette.) Siegfried announces he will marry Odile and they dance the famous Black Swan *pas-de-deux*, in which Odile does 32 triumphant turns in a row.

A rustling of wings comes from the castle window, and a white swan flies away. Siegfried realizes that he has been tricked and has ruined Odette's chances for freedom. He meets her again at the lake. Von Rothbart comes to crow over his victory, and Odette throws herself in the lake in despair. Siegfried jumps in after her. This act of self-sacrificial love breaks the spell and the swan maidens become human again. The souls of Odette and Siegfried are reunited in heaven.

Russians in Music

Tchaikovsky may have been the first Russian composer to achieve world renown, but he is not the only Russian composer.

Mikhail Glinka is the father of Russian music, whose interest in Russian folk music lead the way. The Mighty Handful furthered the nationalism that was sweeping across Europe in the late nineteenth century. The group is comprised of Mily Balakirev, who inspired Tchaikovsky; Alexander Borodin, whose melodies formed the basis of the 1953 musical *Kismet*; Modest Mussorgsky, who wrote the opera *Boris Godunov* and piano pieces *Pictures at an Exhibition*; Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov, the great orchestrator; and Cesar Cui, the critic.

Twentieth-century music has been dominated by Russians, including Sergei Prokofiev, composer of *Peter and the Wolf* and Igor Stravinsky, considered by some to be the greatest composer of the last one hundred years.

Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky (cont.)

Questions for Study and Discussion

1. What were the character traits of the young Tchaikovsky? What did he do that showed he had an unusual interest in music? _____

2. Who was Nikolai Rubenstein and when did he hire Tchaikovsky? Why did their friendship sour? _____

3. Name the "Mighty Five" composers. What were their aims in music? _____

4. Which "Mighty Five" composer encouraged Tchaikovsky to write two great works? What are the names of those works? _____

5. What were the traumatic events of 1877? What changes took place in Tchaikovsky's life after 1877? _____

6. Name some of the composer's works written after 1890. _____

7. How did Tchaikovsky die? _____

Dates to Remember

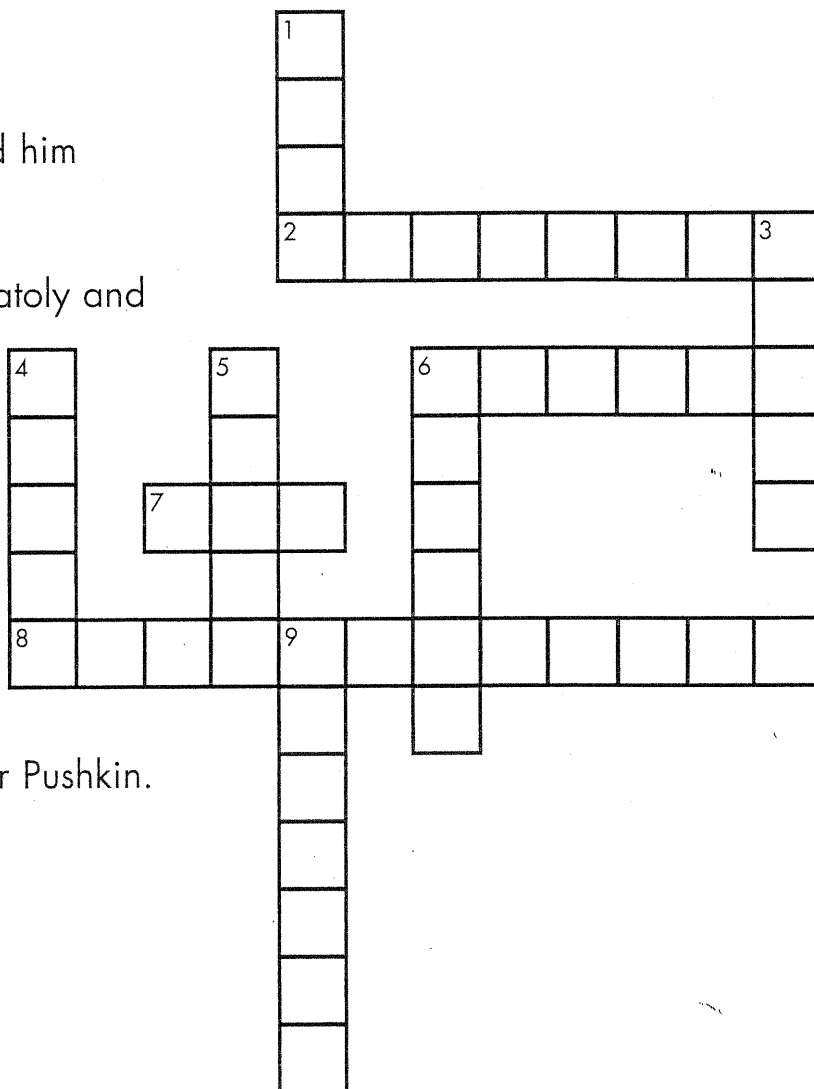
After each date, describe an event that occurred in Tchaikovsky's life.

1. 1840 _____
2. 1862 _____
3. 1866-77 _____
4. 1876 _____
5. 1877 _____
6. 1878 _____
7. 1885 _____
8. 1893 _____

Crossword Puzzle

Across

- 2. Tchaikovsky's wealthy patron, _____ von Meck, supported him financially for 14 years.
- 6. Tchaikovsky's younger brother, _____, was a twin to Anatoly and wrote a biography of his famous older brother.
- 7. Tchaikovsky wrote _____ symphonies, the last one in his final year.
- 8. Tchaikovsky's most famous opera, _____, tells the story of Tatyana and her lover, and is based on a verse poem by Alexander Pushkin.



Down

- 1. Tchaikovsky rented a country house in _____ in 1885.
- 3. _____ Rubenstein taught Tchaikovsky music at the Russian Musical Society, later known as the Conservatory, in St. Petersburg.
- 4. Tchaikovsky wrote music for _____ ballets.
- 5. Music written for ballet, which consists of dances, is called a _____.
- 6. Tchaikovsky lived in _____, the capital of Russia, where he was a professor of music.
- 9. _____ Rubenstein invited Tchaikovsky to teach music at the Moscow Conservatory.