WIENER PHILHARMONIKER

Mozart's Shadow, Tchaikovsky's Fate

Thursday, November 5, 2026 · 19:00 · Festival Hall

Riccardo Muti, conductor

	TONIGHT'S PROGRAMME	MIN
1	**MOZART** 1756–1791 *Symphony No. 40 in G minor, K. 550*	32′
2	**TCHAIKOVSKY** 1840–1893 *Symphony No. 4 in F minor, Op. 36*	44′
	TOTAL MUSIC	76′

Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart

1756–1791

32 minutes

Symphony No. 40 in G minor, K. 550

THE COMPOSER

Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart needs little introduction. Born in Salzburg in 1756, he was a prodigy whose talents were cultivated and exhibited across Europe by his father Leopold. By the time he composed this concerto in 1779, the twenty-three-year-old Mozart was restless in provincial Salzburg, dreaming of Vienna and larger stages. Within two years he would make the move that defined his mature career.

Less well known is his sister Maria Anna, called "Nannerl," five years his senior. She was an equally brilliant pianist as a child, and the siblings toured together as wonders of nature until Nannerl's touring career ended when she was about seventeen. Following the customs of the time, she stayed at home while Wolfgang continued traveling with their father. The brother and sister remained close, and this concerto was written for the two of them to play.

ABOUT THE WORK

In the summer of 1788, within the space of roughly six weeks, Mozart composed his last three symphonies: the E-flat major, No. 39, dated 26 June; the G minor, No. 40, completed on 25 July; and the C major 'Jupiter', No. 41, finished on 10 August. It is one of the most concentrated feats of creative energy in the history of music, and it came at an unpromising moment in Mozart's life. The war with the Ottoman Empire had drained Vienna's aristocracy of money and of appetite for concerts; the subscription series that had made him the toast of the city earlier in the decade had dried up; and the surviving letters from

that summer include anxious appeals for loans to his friend and fellow Freemason Michael Puchberg. His infant daughter Theresia died in June. Why he wrote three large symphonies at such a time, with no documented commission or performance in view, remains one of the enduring puzzles of his biography. The most likely answer is that he intended them for concerts he hoped to give, perhaps in Vienna, perhaps on a tour abroad, but no firm record survives of the G minor being performed in his lifetime.

There is, however, a strong piece of circumstantial evidence that it was heard. Mozart later revised the score, adding a pair of clarinets and rewriting the oboe parts to make room for them, and a composer does not usually take such trouble over a piece nobody will play. Both versions survive, and both are performed today; the version with clarinets is the more common, its darker, woodier blend softening the edges of the wind writing. It has often been suggested that the revised version was played at the benefit concerts of Vienna's Tonkünstler-Societät in April 1791, conducted by Antonio Salieri, which included 'a grand symphony' by Mozart, though which symphony that was cannot be proven.

The G minor is one of only two symphonies Mozart wrote in a minor key, and both are in G minor: the other is the youthful 'little' G minor, No. 25, of 1773. The key held a special charge for him. It is the key of the Piano Quartet K. 478, of the great String Quintet K. 516 written only a year earlier, and of Pamina's heartbroken aria 'Ach, ich fühl's' in The Magic Flute. In each case it carries a quality of restless, contained grief: not the tragic grandeur of Beethoven's C minor, but something more private and more unsettled. The scoring reinforces that intimacy. There are no trumpets and no timpani, the instruments of ceremony and brilliance in a Classical orchestra: just flute, oboes, clarinets (in the revised version), bassoons, two horns and strings.

What made the symphony so important to the generations that followed was the way it holds agitation and perfect formal balance in tension. The nineteenth century heard it as a work of passion and turmoil; Robert Schumann, by contrast, famously described it as a piece of 'Grecian lightness and grace', and the two readings have argued with each other ever since. Both are right. The four movements follow the Classical pattern exactly (a fast sonata movement, a slow movement, a minuet and a fast finale), yet within that frame Mozart pushes harmony and phrase structure further than he had before. The finale's development section in particular, with its jagged unison outburst that tumbles through almost every note of the chromatic scale,

looks forward startlingly to music written a century later. Written in Vienna by the city's most famous adopted son, it is music the Vienna Philharmonic plays as part of its own inheritance.

WHAT TO LISTEN FOR

The first movement (Molto allegro) begins without any introduction or call to attention. The violas start a soft, murmuring accompaniment, and over it the violins enter almost mid-thought with the famous main theme: a falling two-note sigh, repeated, that gives the whole movement its breathless urgency. Listen for how rarely the music settles. Even the gentler second theme, passed between strings and woodwinds in a major key, is short-lived, and in the development section Mozart drives the sighing motif through a chain of distant keys with an intensity that sounds, for a moment, like genuine anguish. When the second theme returns in the recapitulation, it comes back not in the major but in G minor, and the movement closes in the shadow in which it began.

The Andante, in E-flat major and a lilting 6/8 time, offers relief but not quite calm. Its opening builds up gradually, one string section entering after another. Listen for the tiny, fluttering pairs of quick notes that pass through the woodwinds and strings: they give the movement a restless, glinting surface, and in the middle section they darken as the harmony moves into minor-key territory.

The Menuetto is no courtly dance. Its main theme is written so that the strong beats fall across the bar lines, producing a stubborn, lurching three-against-two feeling, and its counterpoint is tight and severe. Everything changes in the Trio, which turns to G major: here the horns, silent or in the background until now, come forward in a warm, open-air passage, one of the few moments of unclouded sunlight in the symphony.

The finale (Allegro assai) opens with a rising arpeggio that shoots up like a rocket and a quiet, answering phrase. The movement is swift and compact, but wait for the start of the development section. The orchestra suddenly breaks off into a harsh unison figure, leaping angularly through a whole series of unrelated notes, as if the music has lost its footing. From there Mozart spins a passage of dense, argumentative counterpoint before finding his way back to the opening material. The sym-

> phony ends as it began, in G minor, with no consoling turn to the major: a close as terse and unsentimental as anything in Mozart.

Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky

44 minutes

1840–1893

Symphony No. 4 in F minor, Op. 36

THE COMPOSER

Tchaikovsky was Russia's first truly international composer and, in his own lifetime, one of the most beloved figures in European music. Born in 1840 in Votkinsk, he trained as a civil servant before turning to music in his early twenties, studying composition at the newly founded St. Petersburg Conservatory. He began teaching harmony at the newly opened Moscow Conservatory in 1866, and over the following twenty-five years produced six symphonies, three ballets (*Swan Lake*, *Sleeping Beauty*, *The Nutcracker*), a string of operas, numerous concertos, and a wealth of chamber and song repertoire that has never left the international stage.

Tchaikovsky was a man of intense feeling, much of it conflicted. Homosexual in an unforgiving Russian society, often paralysed by depression and self-doubt, he poured the full weight of his emotional life into his music. He died in St. Petersburg in 1893, days after conducting the premiere of his Sixth Symphony. The official cause was cholera, though the precise circumstances of his death have been debated ever since.

ABOUT THE WORK

Tchaikovsky wrote his Fourth Symphony between 1877 and early 1878, during the most turbulent period of his life, and the work is inseparable from two relationships that began almost simultaneously. The first was with Nadezhda von Meck, a wealthy widow and passionate admirer of his music who, from 1877, granted him an annual allowance that freed him from teaching, on the condition, which both honoured for thirteen years, that the two of them never meet. Their friendship was conducted entirely by letter, in an extraordinary correspondence of well over a thousand letters, and the Fourth Symphony became, in Tchaikovsky's words, 'our symphony'. He dedicated it 'to my best friend'.

The second relationship was a catastrophe. In July 1877 Tchaikovsky married Antonina Milyukova, a former student at the Moscow Conservatory who had written to him declaring her love. The motives behind the marriage have been endlessly debated, but it is widely understood that Tchaikovsky, whose homosexuality was a private torment in the society he lived in, hoped a conventional marriage would protect him from gossip. Within weeks he found the arrangement un-

bearable. He suffered a severe emotional collapse, fled Moscow, and spent the following months recovering abroad, largely in Switzerland and Italy, supported by von Meck's money. It was there, in Venice and San Remo among other places, that he completed the orchestration of the symphony, alongside his opera Eugene Onegin.

The first performance took place in Moscow on 22 February 1878 (10 February in the Russian calendar of the time), at a concert of the Russian Musical Society conducted by Nikolai Rubinstein. Tchaikovsky was still abroad and did not hear it. Its reception was respectful rather than ecstatic, but the symphony soon established itself as one of the central pillars of his output, and it is the first of his three late symphonies (with the Fifth and the 'Pathétique') to hold its place at the heart of the orchestral repertoire.

What makes the Fourth unusual is that Tchaikovsky explained its meaning. In a long letter to von Meck, written in March 1878, he described a programme for each movement. The blaring fanfare with which the symphony opens is, he wrote, 'Fate, the fatal force which prevents the impulse to happiness from attaining its goal', a power that hangs over the listener like the sword of Damocles. The first movement alternates this oppressive force with fleeting dreams of happiness that dissolve as soon as they are grasped. The second movement is the melancholy that comes in the evening when one sits alone, remembering the past. The third consists of 'capricious arabesques', the elusive images that pass through the mind after a little wine. And in the finale, if you find no joy within yourself, you should go out among the people and see how they enjoy themselves, only for Fate to return and remind you of its presence. Tchaikovsky was always ambivalent about such explanations, and added that the true content of a symphony could not be put into words; but the letter has shaped how the work has been heard ever since.

The musical design is as bold as the programme. The first movement, nearly as long as the other three combined, is built around that recurring fanfare and a main theme in a restless, lilting 9/8 time, like a waltz that cannot find its footing. The third movement is one of the most original pieces of orchestration of the nineteenth century, and the finale draws on a Russian folk song, 'In the field there stood a birch tree', turning the symphony outward from private crisis to the noise and energy of a crowd.

WHAT TO LISTEN FOR

The symphony opens with the Fate motif: a stark, blazing call in the horns and bassoons, taken up by the trumpets, hammering on a single repeated rhythm. Remember its shape, because it returns at every crucial turning point. After it fades, the strings begin the main theme of the first movement, a sighing, syncopated melody in 9/8 that sways uneasily, never quite settling on the beat. Listen for the contrasting music that follows: a gentle, rocking tune introduced by the clarinet, with delicate answers in the woodwinds, which is Tchaikovsky's dream of happiness. Each time the music seems to relax into it, the Fate fanfare breaks in with brutal force. Towards the end of the movement the orchestra builds to shattering climaxes, and the close is fierce and abrupt.

The second movement (Andantino in modo di canzona) begins with a long, plaintive song for solo oboe over soft pizzicato strings. It is music of memory and loneliness, and it is taken up in turn by the cellos and the full strings. In the middle, a more animated passage briefly lifts the mood, before the song returns, now decorated by the woodwinds, and the movement fades away into silence.

The Scherzo is a delight and an ingenious experiment. For its outer sections the string players put down their bows and play pizzicato throughout, producing a rapid, whispering, plucked texture that swells and recedes like a breeze. In the central Trio the woodwinds take over with a jaunty, rustic tune, and then the brass enter with a distant, quiet march, as if a military band were passing in the street. Listen, near the end, for all three groups (plucked strings, woodwinds and brass) trading brief fragments with one another.

The finale (Allegro con fuoco) erupts without warning in a cascade of the full orchestra. Soon the woodwinds introduce the folk song 'In the field there stood a birch tree', a plain, slightly melancholy tune that Tchaikovsky treats to increasingly hectic variations, set against the returning whirlwind of the opening. Just as the celebration reaches its height, the Fate fanfare returns from the first movement, loud and unmistakable, halting everything. The music falls quiet, and then gathers itself again, the festive energy sweeping back in for a coda of tremendous, almost defiant brilliance.

FURTHER READING

ACCESSIBLE **Tchaikovsky: The Man and His Music**

David Brown, Faber and Faber 2007

David Brown's life of Tchaikovsky explains the private turmoil behind the Fourth Symphony and his letters about its idea of fate.

ACCESSIBLE **Mozart: A Life**

Maynard Solomon, Harper Perennial 2005

Solomon's biography of Mozart reads his life and music together, a useful companion to the restless G minor Symphony No. 40.

DEEPER **Tchaikovsky**

Roland John Wiley, Oxford University Press 2009

Wiley's study for Oxford's Master Musicians series combines Tchaikovsky's life with detailed discussion of the works, including the Fourth Symphony.

SOURCES

1. Concert in Osaka, 5 November 2026, Wiener Philharmoniker. https://www.wienerphilharmoniker.at/en/konzerte/concert-in-osaka/10952/
2. Concert in Tokyo, 8 November 2026 (same programme), Wiener Philharmoniker. https://www.wienerphilharmoniker.at/en/konzerte/concert-in-tokyo/10955/
3. Symphony No. 40 (Mozart), Wikipedia. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Symphony_No._40_(Mozart)
4. Mozart: Symphony No. 40, Boston Symphony Orchestra. https://www.bso.org/works/symphony-no-40
5. Mozart: Symphony No 40, Indianapolis Symphony Orchestra. https://www.indianapolissymphony.org/backstage/program-notes/mozart-symphony-no-40/
6. Symphony No. 4 (Tchaikovsky), Wikipedia. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Symphony_No._4_(Tchaikovsky)
7. Symphony No. 4 in F minor, Op. 36, Hollywood Bowl / LA Phil. https://www.hollywoodbowl.com/musicdb/pieces/3998/symphony-no-4-in-f-minor-op-36
8. Tchaikovsky: Symphony No. 4, Boston Symphony Orchestra. https://www.bso.org/works/tchaikovsky-symphony-no-4
9. Tchaikovsky: The Man and His Music, Open Library. https://openlibrary.org/isbn/9780571231959
10. Mozart: A Life, Open Library. https://openlibrary.org/isbn/9780060883447
11. Tchaikovsky, Open Library. https://openlibrary.org/isbn/9780195368925

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