

PYOTR ILYICH TCHAIKOVSKY

b. May 7, 1840

d. November 6, 1893

COMPOSER

“Music’s triumphant power lies in the fact that it reveals to us beauties we find in no other sphere.”

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Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky is one of the most popular composers in history. His best-known works include the ballets “Swan Lake,” “The Sleeping Beauty,” and “The Nutcracker”; the operas, “The Queen of Spades” and “Eugene Onegin”; and the widely recognized Fantasy Overture “Romeo and Juliet” and “1812 Overture.”

Tchaikovsky was born in Votinsk, Russia, a small industrial town. His father was a mine inspector. His mother, who was of French and Russian heritage, strongly influenced his education and cultural upbringing.

At age 5, Tchaikovsky began piano lessons. His parents nurtured his musical talents, but had a different career path in mind for their son. In 1850, the family enrolled him at the Imperial School of Jurisprudence in St. Petersburg, where he prepared for a job in civil service.

After working in government for a few years, Tchaikovsky pursued his passion at the St. Petersburg Conservatory. After graduation, he taught music theory at the Moscow Conservatory and worked on new compositions. Tchaikovsky created concertos, symphonies, ballets, chamber music, and concert and theatrical pieces. His passionate, emotional compositions represented a departure from traditional Russian music, and his work became popular with Western audiences.

Despite his career success, Tchaikovsky’s personal life was filled with crises and bouts of depression. After receiving letters of admiration from a former student, Tchaikovsky married her. Historians speculate the marriage took place to dispel rumors that Tchaikovsky was gay. The marriage was a disaster and Tchaikovsky left his wife after nine days.

Tchaikovsky began an unconventional relationship with a wealthy widow, Nadezhda von Mek, who agreed to be his benefactor on one condition: they were never to meet face-to-face. The couple exchanged more than 1,000 letters, until von Mek abruptly ended their 13-year liaison.

The famed composer died suddenly at age 53. The cause of his death, believed by some to be suicide, remains a mystery.



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