

Musical Treasure Chest #35

The winter solstice has always been a special day for me. When I was a little girl my dad was a scientist at General Electric R & D. He used to call every day around lunch time to say hello and usually to share a scientific fact. On the solstices and equinoxes he would tell me what special days they were and what occurred astronomically to make it so. To this day I think of those four days of the year as landmarks around which the rest of the year is oriented. I look forward to the long days around the summer solstice and the short days around the winter, each has its own unique feel and happy memories. The winter solstice, which is officially called the hibernal solstice, also brings the promise of the inevitable turn towards spring and summer (even if it is a ways off).

With the arrival of winter my musical listening selections tend to go to longer, "darker" pieces. Sibelius, Nielsen, and Mahler all seem good companions. And there is a symphony by **Tchaikovsky** that I adore, the first, which is subtitled *Winter Dreams*. Written in 1866 and slowly painful in gestation, its four sprawling movements stretch the limits of classical symphonic form. Tchaikovsky, though he would go on to compose six more symphonies (I am including the *Manfred* symphony in the list), was always fond of this piece. He wrote in 1883 to his patroness Nadezhda von Meck: "Although in many ways it is very immature, yet fundamentally it has more substance and is better than any of my other more mature works."

Obtaining a premiere performance was difficult. Tchaikovsky appealed to his former teachers Anton and Nicolai Rubinstein to organize a first performance. The composer had his heart set on a St. Petersburg performance (where the best orchestra in Russia was), but the first public exposure to it in the city was of just the two inner movements. Critics were not kind. The first full performance was in Moscow in February of 1868 with Nicolai Rubinstein conducting. The response was highly favorable. Tchaikovsky would continue to tinker with the symphony for the rest of his life. The second public performance wasn't given until 1883 in a revised version.

Tchaikovsky gave the first two movements titles: *Daydreams of a Winter Journey* and *Land of Gloom, Land of Mist*. He writes music that is wonderfully atmospheric for these two movements. The third movement is a *scherzo*, with melodic material recycled from a student piano sonata movement. The fourth is derived from a Russian folk song that he had used before in an ill-fated cantata.

I hope that if you have never heard this rather eye-opening symphony that you will become a fan. And, if you already know it, I think that you will enjoy this performance I selected with the Berlin Philharmonic and Herbert von Karajan. The conductor's rather brooding approach works well with this piece, and the stunning playing of the BPO makes the difficult writing sound expressive and sometimes playful.

Happy Winter Solstice!

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=krJMxZfZcQ>