

A previously unnoticed letter of 4/16 January 1893 from Tchaikovsky to  
Francesco Berger in London

Presented by Thomas Kohlhase<sup>1</sup>

From 1887 to 1893, Tchaikovsky as a conductor of his own works directed above all performances of his works in the genre of programme music—*Romeo and Juliet* (three times), *The Tempest* (four times), *Francesca da Rimini* (five times) and *Hamlet* (three times)—as well as other one-movement pieces, such as Slavonic March (four times) and the festival overture *The Year 1812* (nine times), and also Serenade for String Orchestra (nine times, with separate individual performances of the movements *Elegia* and *Valse* on five occasions each), the four orchestral suites (No. 1 four times; No. 2 once; No. 3 nine times, with four performances of the Finale on its own; No. 4 twice), the first two piano concertos (No. 1 eleven times, No. 2 just four) and the Violin Concerto (five times). Among his operas, Tchaikovsky conducted *Evgenii Onegin* and *Cherevichki* three times each, as well as *The Enchantress* on four occasions.

Apart from the last two operas mentioned above whose premières he conducted in 1887, Tchaikovsky directed, in Moscow or Saint Petersburg, the first performances of the Suite No. 4 (*Mozartiana*) (also in 1887), the Symphony No. 5 and the overture-fantasia *Hamlet* (1888), the symphonic ballad *The Voevoda* (1891), the suite from the ballet *The Nutcracker* (1892), as well as the Symphony No. 6 (*Pathétique*) (in October 1893). Whilst he performed the Fifth Symphony no less than six times (in Saint Petersburg, Moscow and Prague towards the end of 1888, and in Hamburg in early 1889), only two of his earlier symphonies featured, albeit sporadically, on his concert programmes: the Symphony No. 2 (in the revised version of 1879/80) in Kharkov, in March 1893; and the Symphony No. 4 in Dresden in February 1889, as well as in London in the early summer of 1893.<sup>2</sup>

For the concert which he gave at London's Philharmonic Society on 20 May/1 June 1893, just before his departure for Cambridge where, together with Arrigo Boito, Max Bruch, Edvard Grieg (in absentia) and Camille Saint-Saëns, he was to be awarded an honorary doctorate by the renowned university, Tchaikovsky had originally chosen a different symphony—namely, *Manfred*.

We learn this from a letter of Tchaikovsky's, which, though already published in 1987,<sup>3</sup> has for a long time escaped the attention of Tchaikovsky scholars. Galina Malinina, a musicologist at the S. I. Taneev Research Music Library of the Moscow State Conservatory, published the letter in 2004 and has kindly drawn our attention to it.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Translation from the original German by Luis Sundkvist.

<sup>2</sup> See Thomas Kohlhase, 'Čajkovskij als Dirigent', *Tschaikowsky-Gesellschaft. Mitteilungen* 7 (2000), p. 72–90.

<sup>3</sup> In: Arthur Searle, *Music Manuscripts* (British Library: London, 1987; reprint 1996), where on p. 53 there is a reproduction of a facsimile of this letter. The facsimile was subsequently reproduced in the article mentioned in note 4 below.

<sup>4</sup> See G. M. Malinina, 'Po stranitsam mezhdunarodnykh konferentsii nauchnoi muzykal'noi biblioteki im. S. I. Taneeva "Russkie muzykal'nye arkhivy za rubezhom". Novye materialy' in: *Russkie muzykal'nye arkhivy za rubezhom. Zarubezhnye muzykal'nye arkhivy v Rossii: materialy mezhdunarodnykh konferentsii*, Vypusk 3 (Moscow, 2004) (= *Nauchnye trudy Moskovskoi gosudarstvennoi konservatorii imeni P. I. Chaikovskogo. Nauchnaia muzykal'naia biblioteka imeni S. I. Taneeva*, Sbornik 50), p. 47–56 (53–56).

This letter in German (the autograph of which is held at the British Library (Manuscripts Division, RPS MS 366, f. 164)<sup>5</sup> is dated: Paris, 16 January 1893 (NS) and is just one page long. The sheet of paper in question shows some damage on the right-hand edge, but only a few letters at the end of lines 8–10 are missing and these have been inserted in square brackets in the transcription below. Some words which we have added by way of clarification are also enclosed in square brackets. The text of the letter is as follows<sup>6</sup> (the original spelling and line arrangement have been retained):

Paris 16 Januar  
1893

Verehrter Freund!  
Ich danke Ihnen herzlich!  
Also dirigire ich [im] Concert [am]  
1<sup>en</sup> Juni meine 4<sup>te</sup> Simphonie.  
(Ich möchte lieber die Programm  
Simfonie Manfred dirigiren, ab[er]  
da sie sehr schwehr [= schwer] ist, fürch[te]  
ich[,] mit 2 Proben damit nich[t]  
vertig sein [= fertig zu werden].) Die Stimmen werde  
ich schon [?] besorgen.  
Herzlichste Grüße!  
P. Tschaikovsky  
Bald gehe ich zuruck [= zurück] nach Russland.  
Meine Adresse ist Klin, neben Moskau.

In English translation:

Paris, 16 January 1893

Dear friend!  
I thank you heartily!<sup>7</sup> So at the concert on 1 June I shall conduct my 4th Symphony. (I would prefer to conduct the programme symphony Manfred, but as that is very difficult, I am afraid that I would not be able to manage it with just two rehearsals). I shall take care of the parts.<sup>8</sup>  
Kindest regards!  
P. Tchaikovsky  
I am going back to Russia soon. My address is: Klin, near Moscow.

The contents of this letter indicate beyond any doubt that it must be addressed to the pianist and composer Francesco Berger (1834–1919), who served as honorary secretary of the London Philharmonic Society for 27 years. Berger was an admirer of Tchaikovsky's music and exchanged several letters with him in the years 1888–1893.

Whilst the archive of the Tchaikovsky House-Museum in Klin contains sixteen letters from Berger to Tchaikovsky, only five letters from Tchaikovsky to Berger—dating from

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<sup>5</sup> The archival signature was kindly provided by Mr Christopher Scobie (Music Reference Service, British Library).

<sup>6</sup> The underlined name at the top of the page: "P. Tschaikowsky" is not written in Tchaikovsky's own hand.

<sup>7</sup> It is not clear what Tchaikovsky is thanking his correspondent for. It may have been for a letter or for final confirmation of the date of his concert.

<sup>8</sup> i.e. the orchestral parts. No printed orchestral parts of the Symphony No. 4 were available at the time of this letter, so Tchaikovsky must have been referring to handwritten copies.

1888, 1891 and 1893—were previously known.<sup>9</sup> Three of these form part of the archive of the London Philharmonic Society, which invited Tchaikovsky to give three concerts: on 10/22 March 1888, at the end of his first conducting tour of Western Europe; on 30 March/11 April 1889, at the end of his second tour; and on 20 May/1 June 1893, on the eve of his departure for Cambridge.

The abovementioned five letters from Tchaikovsky to Berger have been published in PSSL:

Vol. XIV, No. 3485, Berlin, 25 January/6 February 1888; in French, with the opening salutation: “Monsieur!”; No. 3493, Prague, 8/20 February 1888; in German, with the opening salutation: “Verehrter Herr Berger!” (“Dear Mr Berger!”); and No. 3506, Paris, 24 February/7 March 1888; in German, with the same opening salutation. These three letters deal with the programme of Tchaikovsky’s concert in London on 10/22 March 1888.

Vol. XVIa, No. 4496, Maidanovo, early/mid-October 1891; in German, with the opening salutation: “Lieber Herr Berger!” This is a short letter of recommendation for a pianist: “meinen besten jungen Freund Alexander Ziloti” (“my excellent young friend Aleksandr Ziloti”).

Vol. XVII, No. 4971, Klin, 19/31 July 1893, i.e. two months after the concert in London on 20 May/1 June 1893; in German, with the opening salutation: “Mein guter, lieber Freund!” (“My good, dear friend!”) This letter deals with a further London Philharmonic Society concert which Tchaikovsky was scheduled to conduct in May 1894 (!), and which was to feature the Symphony No. 6 (not yet completed at the time of this letter) and a work for piano and orchestra with Sofie Menter as the soloist: either “something by me”, Tchaikovsky wrote, or Sofie Menter’s “Zigeuner-Fantasie” (“Gypsy Fantasy”), which had been orchestrated by Tchaikovsky himself.<sup>10</sup>

For all the brevity of Tchaikovsky’s letter of 4/16 January 1893 presented above, it is still of great interest with regard to the work that he had originally chosen to conduct at his Philharmonic Society concert in London on 20 May/1 June 1893. At his first concert in London in the spring of 1888 he had performed the Serenade for String Orchestra, Op. 48, and the Finale of the Suite No. 3. His second concert in the spring of 1889 had featured the Piano Concerto No. 1 (with Vasilii Sapel’nikov as the soloist) and the Suite No. 1. These were works which Tchaikovsky had successfully conducted at previous concerts, and which were generally well received by audiences. Now, in 1893, it was to be the turn of the *Manfred* symphony—a work the composition of which Tchaikovsky had kept putting off for a long time, and which had cost him great efforts. Since its completion in 1885 *Manfred* had been performed but a few times.<sup>11</sup>

This was something that Tchaikovsky had foreseen. He assumed that this long work, with its scoring for a large orchestra and all the technical challenges it presented, would be performed very rarely. “My *Manfred* will be played once or twice and then vanish,” he wrote

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<sup>9</sup> See the index in P. I. Chaikovskii, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii. Literaturnye proizvedeniia i perepiska* (hereafter referred to as PSSL), vol. XVII (1981), p. 272.

<sup>10</sup> See Lev Vinocour’s article ‘Liszt – Menter – Cajkovskij. Zur Geschichte des Konzertstücks “Ungarische Zigeunerweisen”’, *Tschaikowsky-Gesellschaft. Mitteilungen* 13 (2006), p. 37–130.

<sup>11</sup> Just four times in fact: on 11/23 March 1886 in Moscow (first performance, conducted by Max Erdmannsdörfer); on 2/14 May 1886 in Pavlovsk (Vojtech Hlavác); on 21 November/3 December 1886 in New York (Theodore Thomas); and on 27 December 1886/8 January 1887 in Saint Petersburg (Anton Rubinstein).

to his “dear friend” Nadezhda von Meck.<sup>12</sup> And, similarly, to his publisher P. I. Jurgenson: “Even if *Manfred* were a work of supreme genius, the fact is that it would still be a symphony which, on account of its extraordinary complexity and difficulty, could only be played once every ten years.”<sup>13</sup> Though at first very proud of what he described as the “best” of his symphonic works to date,<sup>14</sup> Tchaikovsky soon became dissatisfied with *Manfred* as a whole and only the first two movements continued to elicit any approval from him. Eventually he even considered retaining only the first movement (in a revised version) as a symphonic poem.<sup>15</sup> To one of his most cherished correspondents, the artistically and musically minded Grand Duke Konstantin Konstantinovich, himself the author of several volumes of poetry, Tchaikovsky once wrote: “As far as *Manfred* is concerned, I must tell you—without any false modesty—that this work is repulsive, and that I detest it profoundly (with the exception of the first movement). However, I would like to inform Your Highness that, with the consent of my publisher, I shall completely scrap the other three movements (the music of which is very poor—the Finale, in particular, being quite horrendous) and turn this big and terribly long-drawn-out symphony into a *Symphonische Dichtung*.”<sup>16</sup> I am convinced that my *Manfred* will then appeal to people. Indeed, it cannot be otherwise, for I wrote the first movement with pleasure, whereas the other three are the result of great exertion [...].”<sup>17</sup>

Even though we know that Tchaikovsky’s harsh words about *Manfred* were evidently intended to chime with a critical observation made by the Grand Duke,<sup>18</sup> and that the composer very often changed his mind about his own works (his fluctuating attitude towards the Fifth Symphony—created three years after *Manfred*—is but a further example among many),<sup>19</sup> still it is astonishing that in 1893 he was prepared to assume the risk of presenting this problematic and highly difficult work<sup>20</sup> in London. This plan understandably came to nothing. By then an experienced conductor, Tchaikovsky realized that it was impossible to prepare the performance of such a difficult work during the two rehearsals normally allotted for Philharmonic Society concerts. He therefore decided to perform the Fourth Symphony instead—a work that he had conducted just once before, albeit under less favourable conditions, namely in Dresden, on 8/20 February 1889, during his second extensive concert tour.<sup>21</sup>

Some five years after Tchaikovsky decided to perform his Fourth Symphony in London instead of *Manfred*, music-lovers in the British capital finally did receive the opportunity to acquaint themselves with this symphony in four scenes after Byron’s dramatic

<sup>12</sup> Letter of 27 September/9 October 1885 from MaidaNovo. PSSSL, vol. XIII, No. 2778, p. 159–160.

<sup>13</sup> Letter of 22 December 1885/3 January 1886 from MaidaNovo. PSSSL, vol. XIII, No. 2842, p. 229–230.

<sup>14</sup> Letters to his publisher P. I. Jurgenson on 22 December 1885/3 January 1886 (PSSSL, vol. XIII, No. 2842, p. 229–230) and to Nadezhda von Meck on 13/25 March 1886 (PSSSL, vol. XIII, No. 2913, p. 300).

<sup>15</sup> Letter to his friend the composer Mikhail Ippolitov-Ivanov on 23 July/4 August 1886 (PSSSL, vol. XIII, No. 3011, p. 411–412).

<sup>16</sup> This German term (for ‘symphonic poem’) appears in the original Russian letter.

<sup>17</sup> Letter of 21 September/3 October 1888 from Frolovskoe (PSSSL, vol. XIV, No. 3675, p. 539–543).

<sup>18</sup> Immediately after the extract from Tchaikovsky’s letter cited above, we read: “It has certainly not crossed my mind to be angry with Your Highness on account of your remark about *Manfred*: you are quite right and only far too lenient.”

<sup>19</sup> See Thomas Kohlhasse, *Einführungen in ausgewählte Werke Petr Il'ic Cajkovskijs [= Cajkovskij-Studien 2]* (Mainz: Schott, 1996), p. 65f.

<sup>20</sup> See Thomas Kohlhasse, ‘Cajkovskijs mehrsätzliche Orchesterwerke’, *Tschaikowsky-Gesellschaft. Mitteilungen* 14 (2007), p. 46.

<sup>21</sup> See ‘Siebzehnte Jahrestagung am 29. und 30. Mai 2010 in Dresden’, *Tschaikowsky-Gesellschaft. Mitteilungen* 18 (2011), p. 243; and the reviews in *An Tschaikowsky scheiden sich die Geister. Textzeugnisse der Tschaikowsky-Rezeption 1866–2006. Mit Daten zum Leben und Werk Tschaikowskys sowie einem Verzeichnis seiner Kompositionen [= Cajkovskij-Studien 10]* (Mainz: Schott, 2006), p. 128–131.

poem. For on 28 September 1898, the notable conductor Henry Wood, who three years earlier had been put in charge of the ‘promenade concerts’ (the ‘Proms’) at the Queen’s Hall in London and who in 1897 established a new concert series there, directed, in that same venue, the first performance in England of Tchaikovsky’s *Manfred* symphony.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> See *Cajkovskij-Studien* 10 (2006), p. 205, as well as the information on the early reception of Tchaikovsky’s music in England provided in: Gerald Norris, *Stanford, the Cambridge Jubilee and Tchaikovsky* (David & Charles: Newton Abbot / North Pomfret (VT), 1980), extracts from which are reprinted in *Cajkovskij-Studien* 10 (2006), p. 199–206.