

notes

January 30/31

GERARD SCHWARZ CONDUCTS BRAHMS

by Dr. Richard E. Rodda

30 SECOND NOTES: Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov was not only among music's greatest orchestral colorists but also one of the most adept composers at evoking the worlds of fantasy and wonder, qualities heard in the suite from his opera *The Snow Maiden*. Dmitri Shostakovich's *Cello Concerto No. 1*, with Julian Schwarz as soloist at this concert, is among the many works in which he tried to distill the conflicting emotions of life in 1950s' Soviet Russia. Brahms' *Symphony No. 4* is his last work in the form and one of the most profound that he, or anyone else, ever wrote. 🎵



NIKOLAI RIMSKY-KORSAKOV

Born in Tikhvin, near
Novgorod, March 18,
1844; died in St.
Petersburg, June 21, 1908

SUITE FROM *THE SNOW MAIDEN*

- First performed on February 10, 1882 in St. Petersburg, conducted by Eduard Nápravník.
- These concerts mark the first performances of the entire *Suite* by the Des Moines Symphony. (Duration: c. 13 minutes)

Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov left a splendid autobiography that meticulously covers the events of his life until just two years before he died in June 1908. The book reveals a man of wit, industry and discrimination, and he told of the genesis of his third opera, *The Snow Maiden*, in its pages:

“In the winter of 1880, I conceived the idea of composing an opera on the subject and words of Alexander Ostrovsky’s fantasy play, *The Snow*

Maiden. I had first read *The Snow Maiden* in 1874, when it had just appeared in print. At that time, I had liked it only a little; the kingdom of the Berendeys had appeared queer to me. Why? Were the ideas of the 1860’s still alive in me, or did the demands, current in the 1870’s, that subject matter be taken from so-called *life*, hold me in their grip? Or had Mussorgsky’s naturalism carried me away on its current? [Rimsky-Korsakov thoroughly reworked *Boris Godunov* in 1896 to strengthen its stagecraft.] Probably all three together. In a word, Ostrovsky’s wonderful, poetic fairy-tale had made no impression on me. During the winter of 1879-1880, however, when I re-read *The Snow Maiden*, its wonderful, poetic beauty had become apparent to me. At once, I conceived a longing to write an opera on the subject; and the more I pondered my intention, the more enamored I felt of Ostrovsky’s fairy-tale. My warmth towards ancient Russian custom and pagan pantheism, which had manifested itself little by little, now blazed forth with a bright flame. There was no better subject in the world

for me. I went to Moscow and visited Ostrovsky, who received me very amiably, gave me authorization to handle his drama as I saw fit, and presented me with a copy of it. The whole spring was consumed in preliminary work and thinking over the opera in its individual elements; by summer 1880, I had accumulated quite a considerable number of sketches.

“For the first time in my life, I had the opportunity of spending the summer in a genuine Russian village, and we found an estate at Stelyovo, near Looga. Here everything was to my liking, everything delighted me. A picturesque location, charming groves, a big forest, fields of rye, buckwheat, flax and even wheat, a multitude of scattered towns, a small river (where we swam), a large lake nearby, impenetrable roads, solitude, antique Russian villages, everything threw me into raptures ... everything was somehow in peculiar harmony with my pantheistic frame of mind at the time and my passion for the subject of *The Snow Maiden*.... On the first day of settling at Stelyovo I began working on the opera. I composed every day and all day; yet I managed to do much walking with my wife, helped her make preserves, gather mushrooms, etc. But musical thoughts and their fashioning pursued me persistently. All of this was partly jotted down in the thick book, partly kept in my head. I turned to the beginning of the opera and tried to write it directly into full orchestral score. But soon I noticed that my fancy tended to outstrip the rapidity with which I was able to write. Accordingly, I began to notate *The Snow Maiden* in a rough draft for voices and piano. Both composing and recording what I composed went very quickly. The entire sketch of the opera was finished August 12th. No previous composition had ever come to me with such ease and rapidity. About October 1st, carrying with me the entire rough draft of *The Snow Maiden*, my

family and I returned to St. Petersburg. My principal work during the season of 1880-1881 was the orchestration of *The Snow Maiden* — I began on September 7th, and finished on March 26, 1881. In making a general review of the music of *The Snow Maiden*, I must say that in this opera I made considerable use of folk-tunes, borrowing them principally from the collection of *One Hundred Russian Folk Songs* that I had made in 1875-1877.... Upon completing *The Snow Maiden*, I felt like a fully matured musician and operatic composer who had finally come to stand on his own two feet.”

The opera is set in the land of the Berendeys during prehistoric times. The Snow Maiden is in danger of death from the sun's rays if she loses her innocence of love, but she longs for the life of a mortal. Tsar Berendey encourages her to discover love, and places her in the care of two villagers. There the merchant Mizgir falls in love with her, and deserts his sweetheart. The Snow Maiden, in turn, becomes enamored of Mizgir, and when the sun next touches her, she vanishes. Grief-stricken, Mizgir drowns himself in a lake.

The Suite that Rimsky-Korsakov drew from *The Snow Maiden* in 1894 demonstrates his mastery of orchestral sonority and his ability to evoke fantastic worlds with wordless music. The Suite contains four excerpts from the opera: *Beautiful Spring and Dance of the Birds*, which depict the passing of winter in the prologue; the noble *Procession of Tsar Berendey* comes from a ceremonial moment in Act I; and the well-known *Dance of the Tumblers* accompanies some choreography during the Act II celebration greeting the arrival of summer.

The score calls for piccolo, two flutes, two oboes, English horn, two clarinets, two bassoons, four horns, two trumpets, three trombones, tuba, timpani, bass drum, cymbals, tambourine, tam-tam, triangle and

the usual strings consisting of first violins, second violins, violas, violoncellos and double basses.



**DMITRI
SHOSTAKOVICH**

**Born in St. Petersburg,
September 25, 1906;
died in Moscow, August
9, 1975**

**CELLO CONCERTO NO. 1 IN E-FLAT MAJOR,
OP. 107**

- First performed on October 4, 1959 in Leningrad, conducted by Yevgeny Mravinsky with Mstislav Rostropovich as soloist.
- First performed by the Des Moines Symphony on October 27 & 28, 1984 with Stephen Kates as soloist and Yuri Krasnapolsky conducting. Subsequently performed on March 9 & 10, 2002 with Saeunn Thorsteinsdottir as soloist and Joseph Giunta conducting.
(Duration: c. 29 minutes)

By the mid-1950s, Dmitri Shostakovich had developed a musical language of enormous subtlety, sophistication and range, able to encompass such pieces of “Socialist Realism” as the *Second Piano Concerto*, the *Festive Overture*, and the Symphonies No. 11 (“*The Year 1905*”) and No. 12 (“*Lenin*”), as well as the profound outpourings of the *First Violin Concerto*, the *Tenth Symphony* and the late string quartets. The *First Cello Concerto*, written for Mstislav Rostropovich during the summer of 1959, straddles both of Shostakovich’s expressive worlds, a quality exemplified by two anecdotes told by the great cellist himself:

“Shostakovich gave me the manuscript of the *First Cello Concerto* on August 2, 1959. On August 6th I played it for him from memory,

three times. After the first time he was so excited, and of course we drank a little bit of vodka. The second time I played it not so perfect, and afterwards we drank even more vodka. The third time I *think* I played the Saint-Saëns *Concerto*, but he still accompanied *his* *Concerto*. We were enormously happy....”

“Shostakovich suffered for his whole country, for his persecuted colleagues, for the thousands of people who were hungry. After I played the *Cello Concerto* for him at his *dacha* in Leningrad, he accompanied me to the railway station to catch the overnight train to Moscow. In the big waiting room we found many people sleeping on the floor. I saw his face, and the great suffering in it brought tears to my eyes. I cried, not from seeing the poor people but from what I saw in the face of Shostakovich....”

The opening movement of the *Concerto* may be heard as almost Classical in the clarity of its form and the conservatism of its harmony and themes, yet there is a sinister undercurrent coursing through this music, a bleakness of spirit not entirely masked by its ceaseless activity. The following *Moderato* grows from sad melodies of folkish character, piquantly harmonized, which are gathered into a huge welling up of emotion before subsiding to close the movement. The extended solo cadenza that follows without pause is an entire movement in itself. Thematically, it springs from the preceding slow movement, and reaches an almost Bachian depth of feeling. The cadenza leads directly to the finale, one of Shostakovich’s most witty and sardonic musical essays. With disarming ease, the main theme of the first movement is recalled in the closing section of the finale to round out the *Concerto’s* form.

The score calls for piccolo, pairs of flutes, oboes, clarinets and bassoons, contrabassoon, horn, timpani, celesta and the usual strings.



JOHANNES BRAHMS

Born in Hamburg, May 7, 1833; died in Vienna, April 3, 1897

SYMPHONY NO. 4 IN E MINOR, OP. 98

- First performed on October 25, 1885 in Meiningen, conducted by the composer.
- First performed by the Des Moines Symphony on March 17, 1957 with Frank Noyes conducting. Subsequent performances occurred in 1969, 1979, 1988, and most recently on April 20 & 21, 2002 with Joseph Giunta conducting.
(Duration: c. 42 minutes)

In the popular image of Brahms, he appears as a patriarch: full grey beard, rosy cheeks, sparkling eyes. He grew the beard in his late forties as, some say, a compensation for his late physical maturity — he was in his twenties before his voice changed and he needed to shave — and it seemed to be an external admission that Brahms had allowed himself to become an old man. The ideas did not seem to flow so freely as he approached the age of fifty, and he even put his publisher on notice to expect nothing more. Thankfully, the ideas did come, as they would for more than another decade, and he soon completed the superb Third Symphony. The philosophical introspection continued, however, and was reflected in many of his works. The *Second Piano Concerto* of 1881 is almost autumnal in its mellow ripeness; this *Fourth Symphony* is music of deep thoughtfulness that leads “into realms where joy and sorrow are hushed, and humanity bows before that which is eternal,” wrote the eminent German musical scholar August Kretzschmar.

One of Brahms’ immediate interests during the composition of the *Fourth Symphony* was Greek drama. He had been greatly moved by the

tragedies of Sophocles in the German translations of his friend Gustav Wendt (1827-1912), director of education in Baden-Baden (Wendt dedicated the volume to Brahms upon its publication in 1884), and many commentators have seen the combination of the epic and the melancholy in this *Symphony* as a reflection of the works of that ancient playwright. Certainly the choice of E minor as the key of the work is an indication of its tragic nature. This is a rare tonality in the symphonic world, and with so few precedents such a work as Haydn’s in that key (No. 44), a doleful piece subtitled “*Mourning Symphony*,” was an important influence. That great melancholic among 19th-century composers, Tchaikovsky, chose E minor as the key for his *Fifth Symphony*.

The *Symphony*’s first movement begins almost in mid-thought, as though the mood of sad melancholy pervading this opening theme had existed forever and Brahms had simply borrowed a portion of it to present musically. The movement is founded upon the tiny two-note motive (short–long) heard immediately at the beginning. To introduce the necessary contrasts into this sonata form other themes are presented, including a broadly lyrical one for horns and cellos and a fragmented fanfare. The movement grows with a wondrous, dark majesty to its closing pages. “A funeral procession moving across moonlit heights” is how the young Richard Strauss described the second movement. Though the tonality is nominally E major, the movement opens with a stark melody, pregnant with grief, in the ancient Phrygian mode. The mood brightens, but the introspective sorrow of the beginning is never far away. The dance-like quality of the third movement heightens the pathos of the surrounding movements, especially the granitic splendor of the finale. The closing movement is a passacaglia — a series of variations on a short,

recurring melody. There are some thirty continuous variations here, though it is less important to follow them individually than to feel the massive strength given to the movement by this technique. The opening chorale-like statement, in which trombones are heard for the first time in the *Symphony*, recurs twice as a

further supporting pillar in the unification of the movement.

The score calls for piccolo, pairs of flutes, oboes, clarinets and bassoons, contrabassoon, four horns, two trumpets, three trombones, timpani, triangle and the usual strings.