

notes

May 9/10

SEASON FINALE: THE FIREBIRD

By Dr. Richard E. Rodda

30 SECOND NOTES: This Des Moines Symphony concert offers a synopsis of Russian musical history. Mikhail Glinka is regarded as the father of Russian concert music and his opera *Ruslan & Ludmilla* as the country's first nationalistic masterpiece. Peter Ilyich Tchaikovsky was classically trained and he infused Russian spirit and lyricism into such traditional forms as his *Piano Concerto No. 1*. Igor Stravinsky brought Russian music to the world with *The Firebird* and opened a gateway to musical modernism with the compositions that followed. Aram Khachaturian renewed the traditions of Russian Romanticism in the mid-20th century with the ballet *Spartacus* and other works of melody and orchestral color. 🎵



MIKHAIL GLINKA

Born June 1, 1804 in
Smolensk, Russia;
died February 15, 1857 in
Berlin.

OVERTURE TO *RUSSLAN & LUDMILLA*

- First performed on December 9, 1842 at the Imperial Theater in St. Petersburg, conducted by Karl Albrecht.
- First performed by the Des Moines Symphony on March 27, 1939 with Frank Noyes conducting. Four subsequent performances occurred, most recently on September 14 & 15, 2013 with Joseph Giunta conducting.

(Duration: ca. 5 minutes)

The libretto of *Ruslan & Ludmilla* is based on Pushkin's fairy tale. Just prior to her betrothal to Ruslan, Ludmilla has been spirited away from her father, the Grand Duke of Kiev, by the evil dwarf Tchernomor. Ruslan perseveres through

many fantastic adventures to regain his beloved and they are united in marriage in the final scene. The exuberant *Overture* is based on themes from the opera. The opening section uses two melodies from the marriage scene — the rushing scales of the first measures and the fleet theme presented by the strings and flutes. The lyrical second theme (played by bassoons, violas and cellos) is from Ruslan's second-act aria in which he sings of his love for Ludmilla. The development section employs all three themes. The recapitulation begins with the rushing scales and the fleet melody, and continues with an abbreviated version of the second theme. The coda, like the development, uses all three melodies, but adds to them a descending whole-tone scale in the basses. (This was the first use of this melodic device in an opera — here depicting the evil dwarf — that was to become a common technique in the music of the French Impressionist composers a half-century later.) The pesky dwarf is quickly banished, and the *Overture* ends with an

energetic gallop as the fitting conclusion to this fantastic tale.

The score calls for flutes, oboes, clarinets and bassoons in pairs, contrabassoon, four horns, two trumpets, three trombones, timpani and the usual strings consisting of first violins, second violins, violas, violoncellos and double basses.



PETER ILYICH TCHAIKOVSKY

**Born May 7, 1840 in
Votkinsk, Russia;
died November 6, 1893 in
St. Petersburg.**

PIANO CONCERTO NO. 1 IN B-FLAT MINOR, OP. 23

- First performed on October 25, 1875 in Boston, conducted by Benjamin Johnson Lang with Hans von Bülow as soloist.
- First performed by the Des Moines Symphony on March 16, 1947 with Frank Noyes conducting and Jesus Maria Sanroma as soloist. Twelve subsequent performances have occurred, most recently on September 26 & 27, 2015 with Joseph Giunta conducting and Natasha Paremiski as soloist.

(Duration: ca. 32 minutes)

At the end of 1874, Tchaikovsky began a piano concerto with the hope of having a success great enough to allow him to leave his irksome teaching post at the Moscow Conservatory. By late December, he had largely sketched out the work and sought the advice of Nikolai Rubinstein, Director of the Moscow Conservatory and an excellent pianist. Tchaikovsky reported the interview in a letter:

“On Christmas Eve 1874, Nikolai asked me

to play the *Concerto* in a classroom of the Conservatory. We agreed to it. I played through the work. There burst forth from Rubinstein’s mouth a mighty torrent of words. It appeared that my *Concerto* was utterly worthless, absolutely unplayable; the piece as a whole was bad, trivial, vulgar.” Tchaikovsky was furious, and he stormed out of the classroom. He made only one change in the score: he obliterated the name of the original dedicatee — Nikolai Rubinstein — and substituted that of the virtuoso pianist Hans von Bülow, who was performing Tchaikovsky’s piano music across Europe. Bülow gladly accepted the dedication and asked to program the premiere on his upcoming American tour. The *Concerto* created such a sensation when it was first heard, in Boston on October 25, 1875, that Bülow played it on 139 of his 172 concerts that season. (Remarkably, Tchaikovsky’s *Second Piano Concerto* was also premiered in this country, by Madeleine Schiller and the New York Philharmonic Society conducted by Theodore Thomas on November 12, 1881.)

Tchaikovsky’s *First Piano Concerto* opens with the familiar theme of the introduction, a sweeping melody sung by violins and cellos above thunderous chords from the piano. Following a decrescendo and a pause, the piano presents the snapping main theme. (Tchaikovsky said that this curious melody was inspired by a tune he heard sung by a blind beggar at a street fair.) The clarinet announces the lyrical, bittersweet second theme. The simplicity of the second movement’s three-part structure (A–B–A) is augured by the purity of its opening — a languid melody in the solo flute. The center of the movement is of very different character, with a quick tempo and a swift, balletic melody. The languid theme and moonlit mood of the first section return to round out the movement. The crisp rhythmic motive presented immediately at

the beginning of the finale and then spun into a complete theme by the soloist dominates much of the movement. In the theme's vigorous full-orchestra guise, it has much of the spirit of a robust Cossack dance. To balance the vigor of this music, Tchaikovsky introduced a romantic melody first entrusted to the violins. The dancing Cossacks repeatedly advance upon this bit of tenderness, which shows a hardy determination. The two themes contend, but the flying Cossacks have the last word.

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



ARAM KHACHATURIAN

**Born June 6, 1903 in
Tiflis, Armenia;
died May 1, 1978 in
Moscow.**

"ADAGIO OF SPARTACUS & PHRYGIA" FROM *SPARTACUS*

- First performed on December 27, 1956 in Leningrad, conducted by Pavel Feldt.
- These concerts mark the first performances of this piece by the Des Moines Symphony.
(Duration: ca. 9 minutes)

Spartacus is Aram Khachaturian's most sweeping ballet and one of his greatest creations. The scenario by Nikolai Volkov, who also provided the libretto for Prokofiev's *Cinderella*, was based on an episode from ancient Roman history that occurred in 74-71 B.C.E. and was recorded by both Plutarch and Appian. In the story, the Thracian warrior Spartacus, captured and enslaved by the Roman

legions, is trained as a gladiator. His wife, Phrygia, is bought in the slave market by the Roman general Crassus and Crassus' mistress, Aegina, and pressed into their service. Spartacus, though victorious in the gruesome games in which he is forced to participate, rebels at their senseless brutality and persuades his fellow gladiators to overpower their guards and flee. Spartacus becomes head of a rebel force of escaped gladiators and fugitive slaves, which successfully invades the villa of Crassus during a sumptuous feast and frees Phrygia. Spartacus contrives a bold plan to attack the Roman army, but Harmodius, a friend turned traitor by the allurements of the seductive Aegina, reveals his secret to Crassus. The uprising is put down, Spartacus is killed in the battle, and the recaptured slaves are crucified. Though Spartacus died in the rebellion, his quest led to a significant amelioration in the situation of the classes whose champion he had become.

Volkov proposed the idea for a ballet on the subject of Spartacus to Khachaturian as early as 1938, and two years later the project was announced by the Soviet press. Despite almost annual statements that he was about to start composing the score, Khachaturian did not undertake the piece until the summer of 1950, noting on the first page of the manuscript that he was "beginning with a feeling of great excitement." Work on Spartacus proceeded slowly, however, and the score was not completed until February 1954. More than two years passed before the premiere was finally given at the Kirov in Leningrad on December 27, 1956 in a production choreographed by Leonid Yakobson.

The passionate Adagio of *Spartacus & Phrygia* (often referred to as the "Love Theme from Spartacus"), whose melodic style is said to be reminiscent of laments from Khachaturian's native Armenia, accompanies the reunion of the

hero and his wife after her rescue from Crassus' house.

The score calls for piccolo, three flutes, two oboes, English horn, three clarinets, bass clarinet, two bassoons, four horns, three trumpets, three trombones, tuba, timpani, bass drum, cymbals, snare drum, tam-tam, harp, piano, and the usual strings.



IGOR STRAVINSKY

Born June 17, 1882 in Oranienbaum, near St. Petersburg; died April 6, 1971 in New York City.

SUITE FROM *THE FIREBIRD* (1919 VERSION)

- First performed on June 25, 1910 by the Ballet Russe at the Paris Opéra, conducted by Gabriel Pierné.
- First performed by the Des Moines Symphony on February 13, 1971 with Willis Page conducting. Six subsequent performances occurred, most recently on September 27 & 28, 2014 with Joseph Giunta conducting.
(Duration: ca. 30 minutes)

Fireworks. There could not have been a more appropriate title for the work that launched the meteoric career of Igor Stravinsky. He wrote that glittering orchestral miniature in 1908, while still under the tutelage of Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov, and it shows all the dazzling instrumental technique that the student had acquired from his teacher. Though the reception of *Fireworks* was cool when it was first performed at the Siloti Concerts in St. Petersburg on February 6, 1909, there was one member of the audience who listened with heightened interest. Serge

Diaghilev was forming his Ballet Russe company at just that time, and he recognized in Stravinsky a talent to be watched. He approached the 27-year-old composer and requested orchestral transcriptions of short pieces by Chopin and Grieg that would be used in the first Parisian season of the Ballet Russe. Stravinsky did his work well and on time.

During that same winter, plans were beginning to stir in the creative wing of the Ballet Russe for a Russian folk ballet — something filled with legend and magic and fantasy. The composer Nikolai Tcherepnin was associated with the Ballet Russe at that time, and it was assumed that he would compose the music for a plot derived from several traditional Russian sources. However, Tcherepnin was given to inexplicable changes of mood, and he was losing interest in ballet at the time, so he withdrew from the project. Realizing that *The Firebird* might never get off the ground, Diaghilev inquired whether Stravinsky had any interest in taking over for the project. Though involved in another composition (he had just completed the first act of the opera *The Nightingale*), he was eager to work with Diaghilev's company again, so he agreed. He was formally awarded the commission in December, though his eagerness was so great that he had begun composing the music a month earlier. The triumphant premiere of *The Firebird*, given by the Ballet Russe at the Paris Opéra on June 25, 1910, rocketed Stravinsky to international fame. With somewhat uncharacteristic understatement, he said, "*The Firebird* radically altered my life."

The story of the ballet deals with the glittering Firebird and the evil ogre Kashchei, who captures maidens and turns men to stone if they enter his domain. Kashchei is immortal as long as his soul, which is preserved in the form of an egg in a casket, remains intact. The plot shows how Prince Ivan wanders into Kashchei's

garden in pursuit of the Firebird; he captures it and exacts a feather before letting it go. Ivan meets a group of Kashchei's captive maidens and falls in love with one of them. The princesses return to Kashchei's palace. Ivan breaks open the gates to follow them inside, but he is captured by the ogre's guardian monsters. He waves the magic feather, and the Firebird reappears to help him smash Kashchei's vital egg; the ogre immediately expires. All the captives are freed and Ivan and his Tsarevna are wed.

Stravinsky drew three concert suites from *The Firebird*. The 1919 suite includes six scenes from the complete score. The first two, Introduction and *The Dance of the Firebird*, accompany the appearance of the magical creature. The *Round Dance of the Princesses* uses the rhythm and style of an ancient Russian

dance called the *Khorovod*. The *Infernal Dance of King Kashchei*, the most modern portion of the score, depicts the madness engendered by the appearance of the Firebird at Kashchei's court after the revelation to Ivan of the evil ogre's vulnerability. The haunting *Berceuse* is heard when the thirteenth princess, the one of whom Ivan is enamored, succumbs to a sleep-charm that saves her from the terrible King while Ivan destroys Kashchei's malevolent power. The *Finale*, initiated by the solo horn, confirms the life-force that had been threatened by Kashchei.

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, xylophone, tambourine, triangle, harp, piano, celesta and the usual strings.