

notes

September 21/22

SEASON DEBUT: GIL SHAHAM PLAYS TCHAIKOVSKY

By Dr. Richard E. Rodda

30 SECOND NOTES: Peter Ilyich Tchaikovsky is one of music's most beloved and frequently performed composers, and this all-Tchaikovsky concert suggests the range of his genius. Tchaikovsky's early *Romeo & Juliet* is among the most powerful and descriptive works written for orchestra, while the *Serenade for Strings* is pure music, evoking the spirit of Mozart. The *Violin Concerto*, composed during the anguished time following Tchaikovsky's ill-fated marriage to one of his former students, is so challenging that it took him three years to find a violinist willing to premiere it. *Eugene Onégin*, the most popular of Tchaikovsky's eleven operas, is a story of thwarted love in aristocratic Tsarist Russia. 🎵



PETER ILYICH TCHAIKOVSKY

Born May 7, 1840 in

Votkinsk;

died November 6, 1893 in

St. Petersburg.

ROMEO & JULIET, FANTASY-OVERTURE (1870)

- First performed on March 16, 1870 in Moscow by the Russian Musical Society in Moscow, conducted by Nikolai Rubinstein.

- First performed by the Des Moines Symphony on April 18, 1948 with Frank Noyes conducting.

Subsequently performed eight times, most recently on November 19 & 20, 2016 with Joseph Giunta conducting.

(Duration: ca. 19 minutes)

Romeo & Juliet was written when Tchaikovsky was 29. It was his first masterpiece. For a decade, he had been involved with the intense financial, personal and artistic struggles that mark the maturing years of most creative

figures. Advice and guidance often flowed his way during that time, and one who dispensed it freely to anyone who would listen was Mili Balakirev, one of the group of amateur composers known in English as “The Five” (and in Russian as “The Mighty Handful”) who sought to create a nationalistic music specifically Russian in style.

In May 1869, Balakirev suggested to Tchaikovsky that Shakespeare's *Romeo & Juliet* would be an appropriate subject for a musical composition, and he even offered the young composer a detailed program and an outline for the form of the piece. Tchaikovsky took the advice to heart, and he consulted closely with Balakirev during the composition of the work. Though his help came close to meddling, Balakirev's influence seems to have had a strong positive effect on the finished composition.

Tchaikovsky's *Romeo & Juliet* is among the most successful reconciliations in the orchestral repertory of a specific literary program with the requirements of logical musical structure. The work is in carefully constructed sonata form,

with introduction and coda. The slow opening section, in chorale style, depicts Friar Lawrence. The exposition (*Allegro giusto*) begins with a vigorous, syncopated theme depicting the conflict between the Montagues and the Capulets. The melee subsides and a lyrical theme (used here as a contrasting second subject) is sung by the English horn to represent Romeo's passion; a tender, sighing phrase for muted violins suggests Juliet's response. A stormy development section utilizing the driving main theme and music from the introduction denotes the continuing feud between the families and Friar Lawrence's urgent pleas for peace. The crest of the fight ushers in the recapitulation, which is a considerably compressed version of the exposition. Juliet's sighs again provoke the ardor of Romeo, whose motive is given a grand setting that marks the work's emotional high point. The tempo slows, the mood darkens, and the coda emerges with the sense of impending doom. The themes of the conflict and of Friar Lawrence's entreaties sound again, but a funereal drum beats out the cadence of the lovers' fatal pact. Romeo's motto appears for a final time in a poignant transformation before the closing woodwind chords evoke visions of the flight to celestial regions.

The score calls for piccolo, two flutes, two oboes, English horn, two clarinets, two bassoons, four horns, two trumpets, three trombones, tuba, timpani, cymbals, bass drum, harp and the usual strings consisting of first violins, second violins, violas, violoncellos and double basses.

SERENADE FOR STRINGS IN C MAJOR, OP. 48 (1881)

- First performed on October 30, 1881 in St. Petersburg, conducted by Eduard Nápravník.
- The first and only prior performance by the

Des Moines Symphony was on April 13 & 14, 1993 with Joseph Giunta conducting.

(Duration: ca. 20 minutes)

Versatility is one of the qualities of a master creator. Brahms simultaneously composed the very different *Academic Festival* and *Tragic Overtures*; Beethoven wrote the stormy *Fifth* and the pastoral *Sixth* Symphonies at the same time; Ravel worked on the jazzy *Concerto in G* and the dramatic *Left Hand Concerto* together — and Tchaikovsky created one of the orchestral repertory's noisiest and one of its most warmly intimate pieces contemporaneously.

In 1879, Tchaikovsky's publisher, Peter Jurgenson, requested that his client devise some festive strains of celebratory nature to commemorate the Silver Jubilee of the coronation of Czar Alexander II. The project was too important for Tchaikovsky to refuse, so he set to work composing a programmatic overture based on some popular themes that would depict one of Mother Russia's proudest moments — the defeat of Napoleon at Moscow. "The overture will be very noisy," Tchaikovsky warned his patroness, Nadezhda von Meck, in a letter dated October 22, 1880. "I wrote it without much warmth or enthusiasm; therefore it has no great artistic value." He called the piece, simply, *Overture, 1812*.

As though some psychic compensatory apparatus had switched on while he was writing *1812*, Tchaikovsky simultaneously created a delightful work on an intimate scale for string orchestra, a score of geniality and grace and nearly Mozartian sensitivity — the *Serenade for Strings*. "The *Serenade*," Tchaikovsky continued in his letter to Mme. von Meck, "I wrote from an inward impulse; I felt it deeply and venture to hope that this work is not without artistic qualities." The *Serenade* was premiered on October 30, 1881, when Eduard Nápravník

presented the work to an appreciative audience in St. Petersburg, which demanded an immediate encore of the *Waltz* movement; a similar success followed the first Moscow performance, on January 28, 1882. Tchaikovsky toured to Hamburg, Prague, Paris and London with the *Serenade* in 1887-1888, and took it along on his 1891 visit to the United States, where he presented it at concerts in Baltimore and Philadelphia

The first movement is titled *Pezzo* [*'piece'*] *in forma di Sonatina*, "*sonatina*" being a sonata form without a development section. A sonorous introduction in slow tempo prefaces the main part of the movement. The principal theme is a lilting strain that sets the sweetly lyrical style obtaining throughout most of the work. The complementary subject is a skittering melody in rapid rhythms. A recall of the introduction rounds out the opening movement. The following movement is one of Tchaikovsky's best-known and most admired waltzes. The *Élégie* touches on the deepest emotions elicited by the *Serenade*. The finale, *Théma russe*, begins with a slow prologue based on a Volga River work song that appeared in a collection of folk music by Mili Balakirev. The ensuing *Allegro con spirito* uses another Russian folk song, this one a street ditty from the Kolomna district, near Moscow. The slow introduction from the first movement returns before a final, Cossackian flourish brings the *Serenade* to a rousing close.

The score calls for the usual strings.

VIOLIN CONCERTO IN D major, OP. 35 (1881)

- First performed on December 4, 1881 by the Vienna Philharmonic and violinist Adolf Brodsky, conducted by Hans Richter.
- First performed by the Des Moines Symphony on February 4, 1945 with Frank Noyes conducting and Ruth Posselt as soloist.

Subsequently performed eight times, most recently on May 21 & 22, 2016 with Joseph Giunta conducting and Simone Porter as soloist. (*Duration: ca. 32 minutes*)

In the summer of 1877, Tchaikovsky undertook the disastrous marriage that lasted less than three weeks and resulted in his emotional collapse and attempted suicide. He fled from Moscow to his brother Modeste in St. Petersburg, where he recovered his wits and discovered he could find solace in his work. He spent the late fall and winter completing his *Fourth Symphony* and the opera *Eugene Onégin*. The brothers decided that travel outside Russia would be an additional balm to the composer's spirit, and they duly installed themselves at Clarens on Lake Geneva in Switzerland soon after the first of the year.

In Clarens, Tchaikovsky had already begun work on a piano sonata when he heard the colorful *Symphonie espagnole* by the French composer Edouard Lalo. He was so excited by the possibilities of a work for solo violin and orchestra that he set aside the sonata and immediately began a concerto of his own. By the end of April, the composition was finished. Tchaikovsky sent the manuscript to Leopold Auer, a friend who headed the violin department at the St. Petersburg Conservatory and who was also Court Violinist to the Czar, hoping to have him premiere the piece. Much to the composer's regret, Auer returned the piece as "unplayable," and apparently spread that word with such authority to other violinists that it was more than three years before the *Violin Concerto* was heard in public. It was Adolf Brodsky, a former colleague of Tchaikovsky at the Moscow Conservatory, who first accepted the challenge of this *Concerto* when he premiered it with the Vienna Philharmonic in 1881.

The *Concerto* opens quietly with a tentative

introductory tune. A foretaste of the main theme soon appears in the violins, around which a quick crescendo is mounted to usher in the soloist. After a few unaccompanied measures, the violin presents the lovely main theme above a simple string background. After an elaborated repeat of this melody, a transition follows which eventually involves the entire orchestra and gives the soloist the first opportunity for technical display. The second theme begins a long buildup leading into the development, launched with a sweeping presentation of the main theme. The soloist soon steals back the attention with breathtaking leaps and double stops. The sweeping mood returns, giving way to a flashing cadenza as a link to the recapitulation. The flute sings the main theme before the violin it takes over, and all then follows the order of the exposition.

The *Andante* begins with a chorale for woodwinds which is heard again at the end of the movement to serve as a frame around the musical picture inside. On the canvas of this musical image is displayed a soulful melody for the violin suggesting a Gypsy fiddler. The finale is joined to the slow movement without a break. With the propulsive spirit of a dashing Cossack *Trepak*, the finale flies by amid the soloist's show of agility and speed.

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

POLONAISE & WALTZ FROM *EUGENE ONEGIN* (1879)

- First performed on March 29, 1879 at the Maly Theater in Moscow, conducted by Nikolai Rubinstein.
- First performed by the Des Moines Symphony on April 26, 1973 with Arthur Fiedler conducting.

One subsequent performance occurred on October 23 & 24, 2010 with Joseph Giunta conducting.

(Duration: ca. 11 minutes)

In the plot of Tchaikovsky's opera, the young and worldly Eugene Onégin arouses love for himself in Tatiana, a gentle country girl. She innocently writes him a letter revealing her feelings, to which Onégin haughtily replies that the best he can offer her is brotherly affection. At a ball in honor of Tatiana's name-day, Onégin deliberately inflames the jealousy of Lensky by flirting with Olga, Lensky's fiancée and Tatiana's sister. Lensky challenges Onégin to a duel and is killed. Four years elapse, during which Onégin, haunted by Lensky's death, has sought diversion in constant travel and amusement. Upon his arrival in St. Petersburg, he is invited to a party at the house of Prince Gremin, at which he again sees Tatiana, now a grand and beautiful lady after two years of marriage to the Prince. Onégin regrets his earlier refusal of Tatiana's advances and the unsettled state of his life, and realizes that he is, after all, in love with her. He pleads his affection in a series of passionate letters, and Tatiana agrees to see him. She confesses that she still loves him, but that she will not be untrue to her husband. She bids Onégin farewell forever, and leaves him distraught and overcome by despair.

The *Polonaise*, an elegant dance used by 19th-century Russian society to embellish its formal occasions, accompanies Prince Gremin's ball in Act III. The graceful *Waltz* is heard during the scene of Tatiana's name-day party at her family's country estate in Act II.

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