

Piotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky (1840-1893)

“Dance of the Tumblers” from *The Snow Maiden* (1873)

Some plays seem to require music. Often these are fantastic, whimsical, or mythic. There is the famous incidental music to Shakespeare’s *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* miraculously composed by Mendelssohn. Also, please consider the beautiful music by Schubert to the otherwise forgotten play, *Rosamunde*, and the great Ibsen play *Peer Gynt* for which he, himself, commissioned the ever-popular music by Grieg. (The IPO will perform two excerpts this spring.) And IPO audiences are well familiar with Beethoven’s *Egmont Overture*, which is part of his incidental music for Goethe’s play about the mythic hero and martyr for political independence.

Tchaikovsky, in 1873 was asked to provide music to the exotic play *The Snow Maiden*—she melts away at the end when she finds true love—written by Ostrovsky for an assortment of three Moscow theater companies with Bolshoi singers and ballet participants. Tchaikovsky warmed to the task producing interludes, melodramas (music to accompany spoken scenes), songs, and dances.

But there can be some confusion about what *Snow Maiden* music an audience is going to hear because Rimsky-Korsakov subsequently composed an opera based on the same story and with essentially the words of the play as his libretto. His *Snow Maiden* opera premiered in 1882 at the Mariinsky Theatre in Saint Petersburg.

This operatic encroachment was initially upsetting to Tchaikovsky: “our subject has been stolen from us.” He was particularly upset that Ostrovsky’s words were set to new melodies in Rimsky-Korsakov’s arias rather than his original melodies in the songs. “[I]t’s [as] though they’ve taken from me by force something that is innately mine and dear to me and are presenting it to the public in bright new clothes. It makes me want to weep!”

Subsequently, he did make this diary entry: “Read Korsakov’s *Snow Maiden* and marveled at his mastery and was even (ashamed to admit) envious.”

Both wrote a dance, which is variously translated as “Dance of the Tumblers,” “Dance of the Buffoons,” or “Dance of the Jesters.” They are both bright and vigorous, with lots of tambourines. But this is an “All-Tchaikovsky” program...

Violin Concerto in D major, Op. 35 (1878)

At the time of his composition of the Violin Concerto, Tchaikovsky was emerging from a time of extreme crisis. Desiring respectability and not wanting to behave like the rejecting, self-centered subject of his Pushkin-based opera, *Eugene Onegin*, Tchaikovsky in 1877 had married a young music student, a woman who had introduced herself to him via passionate love letters.

Most biographers agree that Tchaikovsky’s homosexuality at a minimum contributed to the failing of his marriage. Just a few months after the marriage, Tchaikovsky fled Russia to Italy in desperation after deliberately plunging into an icy river in an attempt to contract pneumonia! There he was able to abandon himself to composition, completing both his Fourth Symphony (1877-78) and *Onegin* (1877-78).

Feeling paradoxically oppressed by the brilliant sun and luxuriance of the Italian spring, he journeyed to Switzerland in 1878, meeting up with the young violinist, Josef Kotec, and beginning composition of the Violin Concerto. As Tchaikovsky was not a string player, the technical help of Kotec was valuable for the concerto's composition (as was that of the violinists Ferdinand David for Mendelssohn, Josef Joachim for Brahms, and the young American violinist Louis Krasner for Berg).

Kotec had another immensely important role in Tchaikovsky's success. It was he who had been an intermediary between the composer and a wealthy, middle-aged widow, Nadezhda von Meck, who was to provide Tchaikovsky with a generous annual stipend (1878-1890), freeing him from onerous teaching duties so he could compose. Tchaikovsky's relationship with von Meck was far more successful than that with his wife. He had extensive, long-distance correspondence with her, which has been preserved as a wonderful source material for scholars of Tchaikovsky. He inadvertently met her- briefly and awkwardly- only once. United in love of Art, neither seemingly desired any direct personal contact.

While there are numerous beloved violin concertos in the repertoire, four stand out as supremely popular-those of Beethoven, Mendelssohn, Brahms, and Tchaikovsky. In the case of the Tchaikovsky piece, acceptance was not immediate. It was initially dedicated to the famous violinist and pedagogue, Leopold Auer who pronounced it, virtually, unplayable. (Unlike the other "technical advisers" for Mendelssohn, Brahms, and Berg—David, Joachim, and Krasner—Kotec, couldn't play it either.) It's hard to appreciate the difficulties since it seems that every 12-year-old prodigy can surmount them now. But even though the piece was completed on 25 March 1878, it wasn't until 1881 that Joseph Brodsky performed the violin solo in the premiere in Vienna under the baton of Hans Richter.

Again, puzzling for modern ears regarding this beloved and "easy listening" masterpiece, the reception at the time was decidedly mixed. The famous Viennese critic, Hanslick (possibly the model for the pedantic Beckmesser in *Die Meistersinger*), had one of his most quoted misfires when he wrote that the piece "poses for the first time the appalling notion that there can be works of music that stink to the ear."

Despite the initial reception, it didn't take too long, after the tireless advocacy of Brodsky, for the Concerto's melodic beauty and wonderful virtuosity to win over musicians and audiences. Indeed, Leopold Auer became one of its champions, or at least he bowed to its popularity and taught it to his many students, including Heifetz, Milstein, Elman, and Zimbalist.

The Violin Concerto opens with a pair of pastoral orchestral phrases leading to an agitated crescendo. However, the violin then enters and takes a dominant role, which dominates the proceedings with its themes which are tender, passionate, and virtuosic by turns. It is only with the lead-in to the development (the movement is in sonata form) that we get a wonderful orchestral tutti gloriously blaring the principal theme.

Like Mendelssohn, Tchaikovsky places his cadenza at the end of the development, and there are some other solo passages with Mendelssohnian string crossings. The movement ends robustly--pure applause bait. And many audiences do take the bait. Fortunately, there is no connecting fabric between the first and second movements, à la Mendelssohn, so there is no music to be obscured while the soloist is sheepishly, though proudly, waiting for the applause to die down so the second movement can start.

The second movement opens with a colorful but dignified passage for the woodwinds, which perhaps gives one a whiff of incense from the Russian Orthodox Church. But the "Canzonetta" is a little song of a melancholy that only a Russian could write. (Tchaikovsky had originally sketched out a movement that

can be heard, if one wants to imagine an alternate movement, as “Meditazione” in the orchestrated version of the *Souvenir d'un lieu cher* op 42.)

An extended passage by the whole orchestra without the soloist leads directly into the fiery last movement. The Finale contrasts energetic galloping dance sections with slower drone-like rustic passages in a most exciting conclusion. Much to Tchaikovsky's annoyance, Hanslick described this as semi-barbarous Cossack music "without discrimination or taste...[which] transfers us to the brutal and wretched jollity of a Russian holiday. We see plainly the savage vulgar faces; we hear curses, we smell vodka." So be forewarned!

Symphony No. 2 in C Minor Op. 17 (1879-1880 revision)

Who wrote the first Russian symphony? If you were among the group that trained at the St. Petersburg Conservatory—Tchaikovsky entered its first class as a 22-year-old in 1862—you might reply, “Anton Rubenstein.” Rubenstein, who headed the Conservatory and was born in Russia, was a great piano virtuoso who toured Europe as an 11-year-old prodigy meeting Liszt and Chopin in Paris and taking harmony and counterpoint lessons as a 13-year-old in Berlin where his parents settled for a time. He was a true cosmopolitan who only headed the conservatory for five years and subsequently toured the world as a pianist and conductor, including leading the Vienna Philharmonic concerts for two years. He was composing all the while including several symphonies. With his training, he had a great facility in composing—Liszt comes to mind here.

If you were among the group of fiercely nationalist Russian composers called “The Five” (Balakirev, Cui, Borodin, Mussorgsky, and Rimsky-Korsakov), you might reply, “Rimsky-Korsakov” who premiered his *Symphony No. 1* in 1865. The Five rejected Anton Rubenstein as a “German” and also dismissed the extensive Germanic training that would subdue or erase the intrinsic Russian characteristics in native folk melody, Orthodox chant, adjacent Asian cultures, and the original harmonies that could be discovered without training. They held as their idol, Glinka (1804-1857) who had produced the great "patriotic-heroic tragic opera" *A Life for the Czar* in 1836 using Russian folk melodies as part of the texture (though Glinka had been trained in Europe and despite the Russian colorations, the opera met European standards in structure).

Bridging these two camps was Rimsky-Korsakov, who very much regretted his lack of training and made up for it in a program of intense self-instruction in the standard rudiments of composition as he became a professor of composition at the St. Petersburg Conservatory. He recounted his early efforts in writing his symphony “...And I who did not know the names of all the intervals and chords, to whom harmony meant but the far-famed prohibition of parallel fifths and octaves, who had no idea what double counterpoint was or the meaning of cadence, thesis and antithesis, and period. I set out to compose a symphony.”

But also bridging these two camps was Tchaikovsky, who had the ideal mix of composing genius and originality along with excellent training. Yet Tchaikovsky was a through-and-through Russian who had no hesitation in employing Russian themes when it suited him. As Stravinsky put it:

“Tchaikovsky's music, which does not appear specifically Russian to everybody, is often more profoundly Russian than music, which has long since been awarded the facile label of Muscovite picturesqueness. This music is quite as Russian as Pushkin's verse or Glinka's song. While not

specifically cultivating in his art the “soul of the Russian peasant,” Tchaikovsky drew unconsciously from the true, popular sources of our race.”

And sometimes Tchaikovsky drew quite consciously from popular folk sources as in his *Symphony No. 2 in C minor*, which gives pride of place to these traditional materials. The work is often called “The Little Russian,” not due to its relatively short duration, but because it uses Ukrainian folk melodies prominently, and Russians of that time referred to Ukraine as “Little Russia.” (This subtitle was not Tchaikovsky’s and, yes, it has not escaped my attention that this traditional Russian attitude has contemporary political implications.)

Tchaikovsky began the *Symphony No. 2* at his sister’s estate of Kamenka outside of Kyiv (Kiev) in the summer of 1872. Despite a busy vacation away from Moscow where he had a professorship, Tchaikovsky, seemingly in spite of himself, had sketched almost all of the *Symphony* by the time he had to return to Moscow in the fall for his teaching duties. Tchaikovsky completed the work in November and attended a party at the Rimsky-Korsakov house where he performed, at the piano, the finale of the *Symphony*. He reported to his brother Modest “The entire company almost tore me to pieces in their enthusiasm.” Remember, this was in the somewhat “enemy territory” of “The Five.” Mrs. Rimsky-Korsakov, a far better pianist than her husband (they were often compared to Robert and Clara Schumann), wanted to make an arrangement of the *Symphony* for piano duet. (She became too ill to complete the task.) Tchaikovsky opined, to Modest, “I think this is my best work with respect to perfection of form, a quality in which I have not shined before.”

The premiere was on 26 January 1873 in Moscow, and it had both vast audience and critical acclaim. A second performance was quickly scheduled for later in that very season’s concerts. Soon after, Tchaikovsky, in what one would assume was friendly banter, wrote Modest (“Modya”) about his new stature relative to his brothers, “the time is drawing near when Kolya, Tolya, Ippolit, and Modya will no longer be the Tchaikovskys but merely the brothers of *The Tchaikovsky*.”

Yet, within a few years, Tchaikovsky became displeased with the *Symphony*. (He had written to Mrs. von Meck from Rome describing the original as “an immature, mediocre symphony.”) In November of 1879, he requested the full score back from his publisher who, almost negligently, hadn’t published it yet. Tchaikovsky destroyed the original score after he had revised it extensively. Of the first movement, only the (admittedly extensive) introduction and the coda are retained. A new principal theme was created, the earlier primary theme was given secondary status, and the tempo increased from Allegro comodo (Comfortably fast) to Allegro vivo (Lively fast). There was a re-scoring of the March, changes in the “character” of the Scherzo, and a significant cut in the Finale. All this poses the question: To what personal composing period the “*Second*” *Symphony* belongs--early--or more middle Tchaikovsky like the Violin Concerto?

While Tchaikovsky’s reputation had decades of critical scorn in the middle of the 20th century for his supposed lack of rigor and his emotional approach to music which always “sounds like ballet,” he had a constant champion in, of all people, Igor Stravinsky who generally yielded to no one in his acidic comments about other composers. (Examples: “Too many pieces of music finish too long after the end.” And “Why is it that whenever I hear a piece of music, I don’t like it, it’s always by Villa-Lobos?” If you thought the love of Tchaikovsky translated into admiration for Rachmaninov, think again— “A six-and-a-half-foot scowl” is how Stravinsky described Rachmaninov.)

Stravinsky was a conspicuous champion of the Symphony No. 2 at a time when it was seldom performed and conducted the first performance of it by the National Symphony Orchestra (Washington, DC) on January 8, 1941. He also introduced it into the repertory of several other American orchestras. There is a performance on Spotify of Stravinsky conducting the piece with the New York Philharmonic Orchestra in 1940 and one on YouTube of him leading the Los Angeles Philharmonic in 1951.

Tchaikovsky opens the Introduction (“Andante sostenuto” (moderately slow, sustained) with a single chord burst and then the solo horn proclaims the Ukrainian version of the folk melody, “Down by the Mother Volga.” Like Schubert, who also opens his “Great” C-major Symphony with a solo horn introduction, Tchaikovsky then gives us a series of variations on the theme. But these are distinctly Russian variations where the theme is relatively constant and the background changes around it; the colors and textures of the instruments vary more than the melodic contour. The exposition proper is presaged by the winds before the strings burst in “Allegro Vivo” (fast, lively) with a principal theme which also begins the much-later-composed *Russian Easter Festival Overture* by Rimsky-Korsakov. While the latter sounds of an Orthodox chant, Tchaikovsky is much more cutting and angular here. The second theme seems like an engine revving--a series of two-quarter notes followed by a half. The development features all three (Intro, Principal and Secondary) themes in a wild, exciting, and skillful mix. The recap is entirely classical, and the coda—same as the original version-- again features the introduction and the second theme (remember this was the principal theme in the earlier version). The movement finishes quietly with the solo horn again followed by the bassoon.

The second movement, “Andantino marziale” (Lighter and faster than moderately slow, martial), is the bridal procession from an unperformed opera *Undine* from 1869. It seems more childlike than nuptial or soldierly—maybe the water maidens were trying out their legs. The piece opens with the solo tympani playing a repeated tonic dominant in an effect that surely Mahler noticed because of the mocking funeral march of his Symphony No. 1—well known to IPO audiences—opens the same way. (Mahler, just months before his final illness and death, conducted the “*Little Russian*” with the New York Philharmonic on December 18, 1910, in an All-Tchaikovsky program that also included the Violin Concerto.) The middle section employs a mournful Ukrainian folk song “Spin, my spinner.”

The fantastic third movement Scherzo reminds some listeners of the “Queen Mab” scherzo in Berlioz’s *Romeo et Juliette*. Like the Beethoven and Schubert 9th Symphonies, the triple-meter scherzo sections are in sonata form. The Trio is a teasing melody in the duple meter which is combined with the Scherzo in the coda.

The Finale opens with mighty chords, which might remind one of the Ravel orchestration of Mussorgsky’s “Great Gate of Kiev” from *Pictures at an Exhibition*. But Tchaikovsky composed his piece several years earlier. The tempo for the movement proper is, like the first, “Allegro Vivo” and employs the melody from the Ukrainian version of the folk song, “The Crane.” This is a tune that Tchaikovsky presents in his “Russian”-type variations twenty times before we get the second theme which seemingly has a “rumba” rhythm to many New World listeners. But this movement is not in variation or rondo form but in sonata form where the development leads directly back to the rumba. In the revision, Tchaikovsky cut all the recap of “The Crane,” though we get plenty more of it in the rousing coda. And it is during the coda that we hear the tam-tam stroke (an unpitched gong-like instrument) that I promised you in the Mahler Symphony No. 4 *Program Notes and Musings* a few concerts ago.

-Program Notes by Charles Amenta, Artistic Committee Chair & Board Member