

A TCHAIKOVSKY CELEBRATION

BY DANIEL DURCHHOLZ



PYOTR IL'YICH TCHAIKOVSKY

Polonaise from *Eugene Onegin*

Tchaikovsky's 1877 opera *Eugene Onegin* is one of the composer's grandest works. It is based on the classic verse novel by Alexander Pushkin, in which the cynical and worldly title character callously rejects Tatyana, a country girl who falls in love with him. He meets her again after she has matured, married an aged prince, and become a sophisticated socialite. Onegin then becomes obsessed with her and attempts to win her away, but is rejected by Tatyana, who still loves him but refuses to break her vows, destroying him emotionally.

The novel appealed to Tchaikovsky as source material, in part, because the story was so well known among Russians that he could omit much of the exposition and focus on the most dramatic scenes. He also recognized how a specific section of *Onegin* related to and commented on his own life.

In Act 1, Scene 2, Tatyana stays up all night writing a letter professing her love for Onegin. Tchaikovsky saw the obvious parallel to the desperate—and wholly unsolicited—love letters he'd received from a younger woman, Antonina Milyukova. Writing the opera softened his harsh feelings toward her so much that he quickly married her—albeit with disastrous results.

The Polonaise—a ceremonial dance that traditionally opened various aristocratic functions—comes from Act 3, Scene 1 of the opera, in which Onegin sees Tatyana again after years apart. The setting is a grand cosmopolitan ballroom, and the music lush and vivacious. It is essentially a show piece, serving to reunite the two characters. Ultimately, though, it is an important part of the social critique that stands at the heart of Pushkin's—and Tchaikovsky's—*Eugene Onegin*.

Born

May 7, 1840, Kamsko-Votkinsk, Russia

Died

November 6, 1893, St. Petersburg

First Performance

March 29, 1879, in Moscow, Nikolay Rubinstein conducting

STL Symphony Premiere

April 9, 1972, Leonard Slatkin conducting

Most Recent STL Symphony Performance

December 31, 2011, David Robertson conducting the annual New Year's Eve concert

Scoring

2 flutes
2 oboes
2 clarinets
2 bassoons
4 horns
2 trumpets
3 trombones
timpani
strings

Performance Time

approximately 4 minutes

TCHAIKOVSKY

Sérénade mélancolique, op. 26

In the year prior to composing *Sérénade mélancolique*, Tchaikovsky had written a pair of major works: the opera *Vakula the Smith* (later renamed *Cherevichki*) and his Piano Concerto No. 1 (to be performed by Lang Lang at the Symphony Gala, October 18). It's little wonder that both pieces would still be on his mind when he composed the *Serenade* in February 1875. Its opening is borrowed from Act 2, Scene 2 of *Vakula/Cherevichki*, and a melody found in the piece's central section quotes from the slow movement of the Piano Concerto.

The title telegraphs Tchaikovsky's intent, but its beauty both conveys and transcends its doleful ambiance. It was composed for Hungarian violinist Leopold Auer, and it was dedicated to him—a dedication later withdrawn, possibly over disagreements concerning Tchaikovsky's Violin Concerto. The *Serenade* was premiered at a Moscow concert by Adolf Brodsky in January 1876. Auer finally performed it in St. Petersburg, 10 months later.

TCHAIKOVSKY

Pezzo capriccioso, op. 62

The *Pezzo capriccioso* was composed in the summer of 1887 during an otherwise creative dry spell for Tchaikovsky. At the time he was preoccupied visiting his desperately ill friend, Nikolay Kondratyev, in the spa city of Achen, Germany. The cello-and-orchestra piece was begun during his vigil at Achen and finished a few weeks later in St. Petersburg. Tchaikovsky mourned in a letter to his publisher, “This piece is the single fruit of my musical spirit from the whole summer.”

The composer solicited help for the cello part from his friend and former student Anatoly Brandukov, to whom it was dedicated and who performed its 1889 premiere in Moscow.

First Performance

January 28, 1876, in Moscow, Adolph Brodsky was soloist, with the Russian Musical Society

STL Symphony Premiere

October 29, 1960, Leonid Kogan was soloist, with Edouard van Remoortel conducting the only previous performance

Scoring

2 flutes
oboe
2 clarinets
2 bassoons
4 horns
strings

Performance Time

approximately 7 minutes

First Performance

November 25, 1889, orchestral version, in Moscow, with Anatoly Brandukov as soloist, the composer conducting the Russian Musical Society

STL Symphony Premiere

October 19, 1996, Ronald Thomas was soloist, with David Loebel conducting the only previous STL Symphony performance

Scoring

2 flutes
2 oboes
2 clarinets
2 bassoons
4 horns
timpani
strings

Performance Time

approximately 7 minutes



TCHAIKOVSKY

Romeo and Juliet Fantasy-Overture

Tchaikovsky's *Romeo and Juliet* was years in the making. First proposed as a subject for an orchestral piece by his friend, fellow composer Mily Balakirev, Tchaikovsky set about composing the piece in 1869 with a structure also suggested by Balakirev. It premiered in March 1870 to little fanfare. Two substantial revisions, in 1877 and 1880, transformed it into the piece we know today.

Adapting an elaborate stage play into an abbreviated musical form, which still contains the essence of the original, is no mean feat. Tchaikovsky accomplished this by emphasizing three essential themes, which are initially stated and later repeat and interact with one another.

The first theme, heard in the introduction, represents the action's catalyst, Friar Laurence. It is hymn-like, but also contains strands of solemnity and foreboding. The music erupts with agitated sounds representing the warring Montagues and Capulets, a discord eventually overwhelmed by the love theme of *Romeo and Juliet*—surely one of Tchaikovsky's best and most memorable melodies. Regarding the theme, Balakirev wrote, "Here is the tenderness and the sweetness of love."

The battle music repeats with more urgency and drama, with interjections from Friar Laurence. The love theme also recurs, this time with overwhelming emotion and a tragic crescendo, representing the suicide of the lovers. Finally, there is a funereal coda and the stirring finale in which true love triumphs over death itself.

First Performance

March 16, 1870, in Moscow, Nikolay Rubinstein conducted the orchestra of the Russian Music Society

STL Symphony Premiere

November 17, 1911, Max Zach conducting

Most Recent STL Symphony Performance

February 14, 2010, Ludovic Morlot conducting

Scoring

2 flutes
piccolo
2 oboes
English horn
2 clarinets
2 bassoons
4 horns
2 trumpets
3 trombones
tuba
timpani
percussion
harp
strings

Performance Time

approximately 19 minutes

TCHAIKOVSKY

The Tempest, Symphonic Fantasia after Shakespeare, op. 18

Just as *Romeo and Juliet* had been suggested by a friend to Tchaikovsky, so was *The Tempest*. Writer and critic Vladimir Stasov put it in the composer's mind during a Christmas visit to the home of Nikolay Rimsky-Korsakov, in 1872.

Though Tchaikovsky agreed with the idea of writing the piece, he had a fundamental question for Stasov: "Does there need to be a tempest in *The Tempest*?"

Stasov answered affirmatively and laid out what he believed should be the structure of the piece, much as Balakirev had given Tchaikovsky the form for *Romeo and Juliet*.

Unlike *Romeo and Juliet*, however, Shakespeare's *Tempest* is not so tightly focused dramatically. There are many more elements—no pun intended—to address.

Stasov suggested the work begin and end with the sea, both raging and becalmed. In-between should be addressed the themes of Prospero's magic, love scenes between Miranda and Ferdinand, and the actions of Ariel and Caliban.

Tchaikovsky was enchanted by Stasov's instructions, and by the finished piece itself. In an 1878 letter to his patroness, Madame Nadezhda von Meck, he recalled his days spent composing *The Tempest*. "I cannot convey to you my state of bliss during these two weeks... I wrote *The Tempest* without any effort, as though moved by some supernatural force."

It premiered in Moscow in December 1873 and was well-received. When Stasov finally heard it a year later in St. Petersburg, he wrote to Tchaikovsky, "What a delight your *Tempest* is! What an incomparable piece!"

First Performance

December 19, 1873, in Moscow, Nikolay Rubinstein conducting

STL Symphony Premiere

October 5, 1989, Leonard Slatkin conducting the only previous live performance

Scoring

2 flutes
piccolo
2 oboes
2 clarinets
2 bassoons
4 horns
2 trumpets
3 trombones
tuba
timpani
percussion
strings

Performance Time

approximately 18 minutes

First Performance

August 20, 1882, in Moscow, Hippolyte Altani conducted an orchestra assembled especially for the occasion

STL Symphony Premiere

February 9, 1912, Max Zach conducting

Most recent STL Symphony Performance

June 8, 2013, Ward Stare conducting

Scoring

2 flutes
piccolo
2 oboes
English horn
2 clarinets
2 bassoons
4 horns
2 trumpets
2 cornets
3 trombones
tuba
timpani
percussion
strings

Performance Time

approximately 16 minutes

TCHAIKOVSKY

1812 Overture, op. 49

Composers—or artists of any kind, really—aren't often the best judges of their own work. Case in point: Tchaikovsky's *1812 Overture*.

In a letter to Madame von Meck, Tchaikovsky wrote, "The overture will be very loud and noisy, but I wrote it with no warm feeling of love, and so it will have no artistic merits at all."

Loud and noisy it is, particularly during its finale. But orchestras and audiences alike would argue for its merits, as the piece has become a perennial favorite and one of the composer's best-known works.

Tchaikovsky's lack of enthusiasm for *1812* stems, perhaps, from its status as a commission. Earlier in his career, he'd rejected Madame von Meck's request for a commissioned piece, replying, "I trust you would never imagine that I would undertake any musical work purely for the sake of the 100 ruble note at the end of it."

In June of 1880, Tchaikovsky received an offer from his mentor, Nikolay Rubinstein, to write a piece for events unfolding within the next couple of years: the 25th anniversary of Czar Alexander II's coronation; Moscow's Exhibition of Industry and Arts; and the completion of the Cathedral of Christ the Savior, built to commemorate Russia's defense against Napoleon's army in 1812.

This time, the lure of a high-profile (and well-paying) assignment drew Tchaikovsky in.

Still, he put off its composition as long as he could, by which time the Exhibition had been delayed and the piece repurposed to celebrate the dedication of the Cathedral. In October 1880, in the middle of composing his celebrated *Serenade for Strings*, Tchaikovsky knocked out *1812* in a week.

The *Overture* offers a virtual play-by-play of the conflict between French and Russian forces, albeit in condensed and somewhat fictionalized form. There was no decisive Russian military victory, as suggested by the booming cannons and pealing bells of the finale. The Russians actually retreated after losing the Battle of Borodino, allowing the French to occupy Moscow. But the

Russians had abandoned and burned the city, leaving the French to face famine, disease, and the bitter cold. “General Famine and General Winter, rather than the Russian bullets, have conquered the Grand Army,” wrote French Marshal Michael Ney.

The piece pits the Russian people, represented by hymns and folksongs, against the French, suggested by the revolutionary anthem “La Marseillaise.” The lamentations and struggles of the Russian people are palpable, as is the persistence of the French. The themes repeat as the battle continues. But just as the French seem victorious, the decisive cannon blasts ensue and triumphant reprises of “O Lord, Save Thy People,” “God Save the Czar” and Tchaikovsky’s own indelible cavalry charge, along with a joyous cacophony of cannons and bells, sound ecstatically.

Tchaikovsky may have aligned the “battle plan” of his piece with popular folklore, which held that Russian cunning, rather than favorable circumstances, had won the day. But he also stretched credulity with the use of “La Marseillaise” as a symbol for the Imperial Army. Napoleon had actually banned the tune during his reign. Meanwhile, “God Save the Czar,” composed by Alexei Lvov and declared the Russian national anthem in 1833, is another anachronism.

No matter. Though hardly his masterwork, the *1812 Overture* has stood the test of time and today is perhaps more popular than ever. Tchaikovsky often had problems satisfying his harshest critics—and sometimes himself. But he did know how to please his audience.

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Battle of Borodino