

Tchaikovsky Spectacular – February 16, 2019

Piano Concerto No. 1 in B-flat minor, Op. 23

Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky
1840–1893

It is ironic that Tchaikovsky's two most popular works, the First Piano Concerto and the Violin Concerto, were initially rejected by the greatest virtuosi of his country as unplayable fiascos.

“...Utterly worthless, absolutely unplayable. Certain passages are so commonplace and awkward they could not be improved, and the piece as a whole was bad, trivial, vulgar.” This was the verdict of Nikolay Rubinstein, first director of the Moscow Conservatory and one of Tchaikovsky's mentors, on hearing the composer play his new Piano Concerto on Christmas Eve 1874. The tirade raised Tchaikovsky's hackles, and he refused to change a single note (although in later editions he made some minor modifications). But with Rubinstein's negative opinion, he had little chance of mounting a respectable performance – or unbiased reception – in Russia. What has come to be the most popular piano concerto by Russia's most popular composer was premiered in Boston on October 25 1875, with a pick-up orchestra and famed pianist Hans von Bülow, where it was a smashing success.

It is worth remembering that the First Piano Concerto came relatively early in Tchaikovsky's career. Rubenstein had served both as a mentor and first employer to the young composer. Moreover, Tchaikovsky's well-known bouts of depression and sense of alienation because of his homosexuality exacerbated his self-doubts about the quality of his music. It was a personal triumph, therefore, that he managed to withstand Rubinstein's vicious assault.

Although the majestic introduction has become so well known as to be recognizable even to people unfamiliar with classical music, it was revolutionary for its time. It remains unlike any standard introduction in the orchestral repertory, replete with a fully developed theme and a cadenza.

Introduced by a soft chordal transition, the exposition begins with a melody Tchaikovsky allegedly heard a blind beggar sing at a country fair, but this theme too is hardly touched on again. The two following themes, one for the winds, the other for the strings, become more important for the movement as a whole. The long cadenza is unusually restrained, a fine vehicle for highlighting the pianist's control of pianissimo.

The second movement opens with a gentle theme on the flute, accompanied by muted strings; the theme is then taken up by the piano with just a single note change. Instead of maintaining the tempo for the middle section of the slow movement, Tchaikovsky quixotically launches into a cadenza of pianistic pyrotechnics as a lead-in to a melody based on a popular cabaret song of the time.

In the rondo finale Tchaikovsky again uses a folk tune in triple meter, but with the accent always on the second beat. As momentum towards the climax builds, the violins sneak in a hint of the main theme of the first movement. In place of a formal solo cadenza, an excited coda with lavish pianistic flourishes concludes the Concerto.

It is probably fair to ask why this Concerto is such a popular competition piece. In keeping with the composer's tumultuous emotional life, it requires of the performer a mastery of just about every artistic and technical resource: rapid passages in octaves, abrupt changes in

mood, delicate passages of arpeggiated filigree, giant buildups of harmonic and emotional tension, whispered legato pianissimos. Is it any wonder Rubinstein overreacted?

Symphony No. 5 in E minor, Op. 64

Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky
1840-1893

Throughout his creative career, Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky's inspiration went through extreme cycles, tied to his frequent bouts of deep depression and self-doubt. In mid-May 1888 he wrote to his brother Modest that he was convinced that he had written himself out and that he now felt neither the impulse nor the inclination to compose. By the end of the month, however, he set about "...getting a symphony out of my dulled brain, with difficulty." Inspiration must have started to flow, for by the end of August, the massive Fifth Symphony was finished.

As was the case with most of Tchaikovsky's compositions, the premiere of the Symphony – in St. Petersburg, with the composer conducting – earned mixed reactions. The audience liked it, critics panned it and fellow-composers were envious. Modest believed that the problem with the critics lay with his brother's lack of confidence as a conductor. Tchaikovsky himself, however, was never at ease with the Symphony, and wrote to his benefactress, Nadeja von Meck: "Having played my symphony twice in St. Petersburg and once in Prague, I have come to the conclusion that it is a failure. There is something repellent in it, some exaggerated color, some insincerity of construction, which the public instinctively recognizes. It was clear to me that the applause and ovations were not for this but for other works of mine, and that the Symphony itself will never please the public." For the rest of his life he felt ambivalent about its merits, although after a concert in Germany, where the musicians were enthusiastic, he felt more positive.

The mood of the entire Symphony is set by the introduction, a somber motto in the clarinets that reappears throughout the work and hints at some hidden extra-musical agenda. Perhaps the motto reflects the melancholy and self-doubt Tchaikovsky experienced when he started composing the Symphony; certainly its mood is maintained throughout most of the work, where it casts a pall over whatever it touches. After the Introduction, the first movement continues *Andante con anima* with a resolute march theme, almost a grim procession through adversity. A second beautifully orchestrated theme reveals how many ways there are to represent a sigh in music. Even the idyllic ambience of the second movement, *Andante cantabile*, its main theme one of the repertory's great horn solos, followed by a more animated theme for solo oboe, opens with ponderous introductory measures for the double basses and cellos, playing the underlying harmony of the motto. Later, the movement is interrupted by the sudden recurrence of the motto blasted out by a solo trumpet over the threatening rumble of the timpani.

The third movement is a waltz based on a street melody the composer had heard in Florence ten years before. It also has an undertone of sadness, and towards the end the somber motto is again heard, the mood continuing into the Finale.

The last movement presents the motto as the focal point of a final struggle between darkness and light, symbolized by the vacillation between its original E minor and E major. The stately introduction mirrors the opening of the piece, although in an ambiguous mood and mode. With the *Allegro*, the key returns decidedly to the minor, but the tempo picks up into

a spirited *Trepak*, a Russian folkdance. Finally, following a grand pause, the key switches definitively to E major – with great pomp and fanfare – for a majestic coda based on the motto and a final trumpet blast of a version in E major of the first movement march.

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