

PROGRAM

ONE HUNDRED TWENTY-SECOND SEASON

Chicago Symphony Orchestra

Riccardo Muti Music Director

Pierre Boulez Helen Regenstein Conductor Emeritus

Yo-Yo Ma Judson and Joyce Green Creative Consultant

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Saturday, June 29, 2013, at 7:30

Carlos Miguel Prieto Conductor

Jennifer Koh Violin

Music by Piotr Tchaikovsky

Capriccio italien, Op. 45

Violin Concerto in D Major, Op. 35

Allegro moderato

Canzonetta: Andante

Finale: Allegro vivacissimo

JENNIFER KOH

INTERMISSION

Symphony No. 4 in F Minor, Op. 36

Andante sostenuto

Andantino in modo di canzona

Scherzo: Pizzicato ostinato

Finale: Allegro con fuoco



Piotr Tchaikovsky

Born May 7, 1840, Votkinsk, Russia.

Died November 6, 1893, St. Petersburg, Russia.

Capriccio italien, Op. 45

Tchaikovsky was not the first important nineteenth-century composer to find inspiration in Italy. Berlioz went to Italy, as a stipulation of winning the Prix de Rome in 1830, and ended up staying fifteen months and falling in love with the landscape and sunlight. His *Harold in Italy* is a thinly disguised, impassioned remembrance of his travels. While in Rome, Berlioz ran into Felix Mendelssohn, who had journeyed south on the advice of Goethe, and who, too, would return home with musical souvenirs, including his *Italian Symphony*.

When Tchaikovsky arrived in Rome in December 1879, he was enchanted. It was hardly the same city he remembered from his first visit two years earlier, when he had traveled to Italy primarily to escape the fiasco of his failed marriage, to recover from a serious nervous collapse, and to put his bungled suicide attempt out of his mind.

This time, he and his brother Modest toured the city, with Baedeker in hand, and they were overwhelmed by the abundance of riches. He studied the works of Raphael with wonder—"that Mozart of painting"—but even long hours contemplating the strength and "gloomy grandeur" of the great Michelangelo works did not entirely win him over (they reminded him of Beethoven). Italian music, he said, was hardly worth hearing.

Like Lucy Honeychurch, in E. M. Forster's *A Room with a View*, Tchaikovsky discovered more about Italy, and about himself, when he was separated from Baedeker. "The true Italy," Forster wrote, "is only to be found by patient observation." Tchaikovsky was indeed patient: he returned often to the Sistine Chapel frescoes, and by the time he left Italy, he had a new respect for Michelangelo. He had even succumbed to the

COMPOSED

1880

FIRST PERFORMANCE

December 18, 1880, Moscow, Russia.

INSTRUMENTATION

three flutes and piccolo, two oboes and English horn, two clarinets, two bassoons, four horns, two trumpets and two cornets, three trombones and tuba, timpani, percussion, harp, strings

APPROXIMATE

PERFORMANCE TIME
16 minutes

charms of the local music he had at first dismissed.

In January of 1880, Tchaikovsky said that he wanted to write an Italian suite based on folk melodies, and that he envisioned “something like the Spanish fantasias of Glinka.” Within a week the main work was done. The orchestration was not completed until May, when Tchaikovsky was back in Russia. By the composer’s own account, the tunes came from anthologies and from the streets of Italy. The opening trumpet call was the music that awakened him each morning in Rome (his hotel was situated next to a barracks).

Of the other melodies, only the dazzling final tarantella has been identified. Structurally, the Italian Capriccio—the title was finalized once back in Russia—is little more than a loose succession of Italian songs and dances—a musical travelogue. But Tchaikovsky had been a patient observer and his ear was, as always, keen: the orchestration is imaginative, colorful, and richly evocative. Tchaikovsky quickly learned that even the most potent memories of Italy fade eventually, but with this orchestral suite he left us a portrait of the country that lives on in concert halls around the world. ■



Piotr Tchaikovsky

Born May 7, 1840, Votkinsk, Russia.

Died November 6, 1893, St. Petersburg, Russia.

Violin Concerto in D Major, Op. 35

This violin concerto was the best thing to come of a very bad marriage. In May 1877, Tchaikovsky received a letter from Antonina Milyukova, a former student he couldn't remember, who said she was madly in love with him. Earlier that year, Tchaikovsky had entered into an extraordinary relationship, conducted entirely by correspondence, with Nadezhda von Meck, and he found this combination of intellectual intimacy and physical distance ideal. In order to keep his homosexuality from the public, he impulsively seized on the convenient, though unpromising, idea of marriage to a woman he didn't even know. On June 1, Tchaikovsky visited Antonina

Milyukova for the first time; a day or two later he proposed.

The marriage lasted less than three months, but it must have seemed a lifetime. Tchaikovsky quickly learned to despise Antonina—he couldn't even bring himself to introduce her as his wife—and he was shocked to learn that she knew not one note of music. In September, he botched a pathetic suicide attempt (he waded into the freezing Moscow River hoping to contract a fatal chill) and then fled to Saint Petersburg. On October 13, Anatoly, one of the composer's younger twin brothers, took Tchaikovsky on an extended trip to Europe. His thoughts quickly turned to composing,

COMPOSED

March–April 1878

FIRST PERFORMANCE

December 4, 1881, Vienna

FIRST CSO PERFORMANCE

December 8, 1899;
Auditorium Theatre.
Alexandre Petschnikoff,
violin; Theodore Thomas,
conductor

INSTRUMENTATION

solo violin, two flutes, two oboes, two clarinets, two bassoons, four horns, two trumpets, timpani, and strings

APPROXIMATE PERFORMANCE TIME

34 minutes

CSO RECORDINGS

1940. Nathan Milstein, violin;
Frederick Stock, conductor.
Columbia

1945. Erica Morini, violin;
Désiré Defauw, conductor.
RCA

1957. Jascha Heifetz, violin;
Fritz Reiner, conductor. RCA

confirming what he wrote to Nadezhda von Meck during the very worst days: “My heart is full. It thirsts to pour itself out in music.” He returned to composition cautiously, beginning with the works that had been interrupted by the unfortunate encounter with Antonina: he completed the Fourth Symphony in January 1878 and finished *Eugene Onegin* the next month.

By March, he had recovered his old strength; he settled briefly in Clarens, Switzerland, and there, in the span of eleven days, he sketched a new work—a violin concerto in D major; he completed the scoring two weeks later. When he returned to Russia in late April, there were still lingering difficulties—Antonina alternately accepted and rejected the divorce papers, and even extracted the supreme revenge of moving into the apartment above his—but the worst year of his life was over.

The Violin Concerto was launched by a visit to Clarens from Tchaikovsky’s student and friend—and possible lover—the violinist Yosif Kotek, who arrived at Tchaikovsky’s door with a suitcase full of music. (Kotek had been a witness at Tchaikovsky’s wedding.) The next day they played through Lalo’s *Symphonie espagnole*, and Tchaikovsky was immediately taken with the idea of writing a large work for violin and orchestra. He liked the way that Lalo “does not strive after profundity, but carefully avoids routine, seeks out new forms, and thinks more about musical beauty than about observing established traditions, as do the

Germans.” He plunged in at once, and found to his delight that music came to him easily. (Shortly after he arrived in Clarens, he had begun a piano sonata, but it didn’t go well and he quickly gave it up.) Each day, Kotek offered advice on violinistic matters, and he learned the score page by page as Tchaikovsky wrote it. On April 1, when the work was completely sketched, they played through the concerto for Anatoly’s twin brother, Modest. Both Yosif and Modest thought the slow movement was weak. Four days later, Tchaikovsky wrote a new one (the original Andante became the Meditation from *Souvenir d’un lieu cher*), immediately began scoring the work, and unveiled the finished product on April 11. Clearly he was back on track.

New problems awaited Tchaikovsky, however. Although the concerto was dedicated to the great violinist Leopold Auer and the premiere was already advertised for the following March 22, Auer stunned the composer by dismissing the piece as unplayable. Tchaikovsky was deeply wounded, and the premiere was postponed indefinitely. “Coming from such an authority,” Tchaikovsky said, Auer’s rejection “had the effect of casting this unfortunate child of my imagination into the limbo of the hopelessly forgotten.”

Two years passed. Then one day, Tchaikovsky’s publisher informed him that Adolf Brodsky, a young violinist, had learned the concerto and persuaded Hans Richter and the Vienna Philharmonic to play it in concert. That performance,

in December 1881, was no doubt horrible, as the orchestra, under-rehearsed and reading from parts chock full of mistakes, played pianissimo throughout to avert disaster. Reviewing the concerto, the often ill-tempered critic Eduard Hanslick wrote that, for the first time, he realized that there was music “whose stink one can hear.” Tchaikovsky never got over that review, and, for the rest of his life, it is said, he could quote it by heart. Although Hanslick stood by his opinion, Auer later admitted that the concerto was merely difficult, not unplayable, and he taught it to his students, including Mischa Elman and Jascha Heifetz, who both played it in Chicago.

Hanslick’s dislike is hard to understand, for this is hardly an inflated, pretentious, and vulgar work, although those are the words he used. In fact, Tchaikovsky’s lyric gift has seldom seemed so natural, flowing effortlessly through all three movements. If there is any deficiency here, it is one of form and construction, not content; even the most casual listener may find it disconcerting that—as with the popular “Tonight We Love” tune in the B-flat piano concerto—the lovely theme with which

Tchaikovsky begins vanishes into thin air after a few seconds, never to return.

Hanslick also took offense at the demanding, virtuosic solo part, writing in terms that crop up in reviews of new music to this day: “The violin is no longer played; it is pulled about, torn, beaten black and blue.” What Hanslick failed to notice is the way Tchaikovsky has taken care to cushion even the most challenging, exhibitionistic passages in music of unforced lyricism and restraint. Even Hanslick admitted that the lovely slow movement made progress in winning him over. But the brilliant finale, with its driving, folklike melodies and very “Russian” second theme over the low bagpipe drone of open fifths, was too much for him, and he concluded sputtering about wretched Russian holidays and the smell of vodka. Even Auer had to admit that Hanslick’s comment “did credit neither to his good judgment nor to his reputation as a critic.” “The concerto has made its way in the world,” he wrote years later, after it had, in fact, become one of Tchaikovsky’s most beloved works, “and, after all, that is the most important thing. It is impossible to please everybody.” ■



Piotr Tchaikovsky

Symphony No. 4 in F Minor, Op. 36

Tchaikovsky was at work on his Fourth Symphony when he received a letter from Antonina Milyukova claiming to be a former student of his and declaring that she was madly in love with him. Tchaikovsky had just read Pushkin's *Eugene Onegin*, hoping to find an opera subject, and he saw fateful parallels between Antonina and Pushkin's heroine, Tatiana. Perhaps Tchaikovsky confused art and life; in any event, the consequences were dire. It is hard to say which letter provoked the stronger response from Tchaikovsky—the despairing letter Tatiana writes to the cold-hearted Onegin, or

the one he himself received from Antonina, threatening suicide. The first inspired one of the great scenes in opera; the latter precipitated a painful and disastrous marriage.

We have since learned enough about Tchaikovsky, and about the agony of repressed homosexuality, to understand why he would choose to marry a woman he didn't even know as a kind of cover. (Less than a year earlier, Tchaikovsky had begun an extraordinary relationship, conducted exclusively by correspondence, with Nadezhda von Meck, and he delighted in the combination of intellectual intimacy and physical distance.) On June 1,

COMPOSED

May 1877–January 19, 1878

FIRST PERFORMANCE

March 4, 1878; Moscow, Russia

FIRST CSO PERFORMANCE

November 3, 1899, Auditorium Theatre. Theodore Thomas conducting

INSTRUMENTATION

two flutes and piccolo, two oboes, two clarinets, two bassoons, four horns, two trumpets, three trombones and tuba, timpani, triangle, cymbals, bass drum, strings

APPROXIMATE PERFORMANCE TIME

44 minutes

CSO RECORDINGS

1951. Rafael Kubelík conducting. Mercury

1984. Sir Georg Solti conducting. London

1988. Claudio Abbado conducting. CBS

1997. Daniel Barenboim conducting. Teldec

A 1957 performance with Fritz Reiner conducting is included in *Chicago Symphony Orchestra in the Twentieth Century: Collector's Choice*.

1877, Tchaikovsky stopped work on the first three movements of this symphony and visited Antonina Milyukova for the first time. A day or two later he proposed.

He didn't tell Nadezhda von Meck of his plans until three days before the wedding. In that letter he confessed that he had "lived thirty-seven years with an innate aversion to marriage. . . . In a day or two my marriage will take place," he wrote in closing. "What will happen after that I do not know." Tchaikovsky quickly learned that, in addition to the obvious strain of living with someone to whom he felt profound physical aversion, he would grow to disdain Antonina, particularly after the stunning discovery that she knew not one note of music. "My heart is full," he wrote to von Meck. "It thirsts to pour itself out in music."

It was music that kept him going. When he was able to escape, temporarily, to Kamenka, he found solace in his fourth symphony and by working intermittently on *Eugene Onegin*. He returned to Moscow in late September, barely in time to begin the fall term at the conservatory, and discovered, surely without surprise, that he could maintain the façade no longer. Many years later, he confessed that he waded into the Moscow River, hoping to contract a fatal chill, and stood with the icy water up to his waist until he could, literally, stand no more. He then fled to Saint Petersburg, where a psychiatrist prescribed a complete change of scenery and a permanent separation from Antonina. Nicolai Rubinstein and Tchaikovsky's

brother Anatoly rushed to Moscow to tell Antonina. She listened calmly and served them tea.

Tchaikovsky's marriage lasted less than three months. On October 13, Anatoly took Tchaikovsky to Switzerland, then on to Paris and Italy. Tchaikovsky asked that the unfinished manuscript of the Fourth Symphony be sent from Moscow and he completed the scoring in January 1878. He finished *Eugene Onegin* the following month. That March he sketched the violin concerto in just eleven days. When he returned to Russia in late April, his problems with Antonina were still unresolved—she first accepted and then rejected the divorce papers, and later extracted her final revenge by moving into the apartment above his—but the worst year of his life was over.

The temptation to read a program into Tchaikovsky's Fourth Symphony is as old as the work itself. Since Nadezhda von Meck allowed Tchaikovsky to dedicate the symphony to her (without mentioning her name) and was contributing generously to support his career, she demanded to know what the work was about. Tchaikovsky's response, often quoted, is a detailed account, filled with emotional thoughts and empty phrases—words written after the fact to satisfy an indispensable patron. When Tchaikovsky mentions fate, however, his words ring true; this was a subject that had haunted him since 1876, when he saw *Carmen* and was struck by the "death of the

two principals who, through fate, *fatum*, ultimately reach the peak of their suffering and their inescapable end.” He wrote to Nadezhda von Meck:

The introduction is the *seed* of the whole symphony, undoubtedly the main idea. This is *fate*, that fatal force which prevents the impulse to happiness from attaining its goal, which jealously ensures that peace and happiness shall not be complete and unclouded, which hangs above your head like the sword of Damocles, and unwaveringly, constantly poisons the soul.

Indeed, the icy blast from the horns that opens this symphony returns repeatedly in the first movement (and once in the finale), each time wiping out everything in its path. It’s like the celebrated fate motive from Beethoven’s Fifth Symphony—the one the composer himself compared to fate knocking at the door—except that it’s more of a disruption than a compositional device. Later, Tchaikovsky wrote to the composer Sergei Taneyev, a former student:

Of course my symphony is programmatic, but this program is such that it cannot be formulated in words. That would excite ridicule and appear comic. Ought not a symphony—that is, the most lyrical of all forms—to be such a work? Should it not express everything for which

there are no words, but which the soul wishes to express, and which requires to be expressed? . . . Please do not think that I aspire to paint before you a depth and grandeur of thought that cannot be easily understood in words. I was not trying to express any new thought. In essence my symphony imitates Beethoven’s Fifth; that is, I was not imitating its musical thoughts, but the fundamental idea. Do you think there is a program in the Fifth Symphony? Not only is there a program, but in this instance there cannot be any question about its efforts to express itself. My symphony rests upon a foundation that is nearly the same, and if you haven’t understood me, it follows only that I am not a Beethoven, a fact which I have never doubted.

Taneyev was perhaps the first to question the preponderance of what he called ballet music in the symphony. In fact, the lilting main theme of the opening movement (marked “in movimento di valse”) and the whole of the two inner movements—the slow *pas de deux* with its mournful oboe solo, and the brilliant and playful *pizzicato scherzo*—remind us that the best of Tchaikovsky’s ballet scores are symphonic in scope and tone. Tchaikovsky was angered by the comment and asked Taneyev if he considered as ballet music “every cheerful tune that has a dance rhythm? If that’s the case,”

he concluded, “you must also be unable to reconcile yourself to the majority of Beethoven’s symphonies in which you encounter such things at every turn.” The finale is more complex, emotionally and musically, swinging from the dark emotions of the first movement to a more festive mood. “If you cannot discover reasons for happiness in yourself,” Tchaikovsky wrote to Mme von Meck, “look at others. Get out among the people. Look what a good time they have simply surrendering themselves to joy.” There is one final intrusion of the fateful horns from the symphony’s opening, but this time the music

quickly recovers, rousing itself to a defiantly triumphant and heroic Beethovenian ending, in intention if not in substance. ■

Phillip Huscher

Phillip Huscher is the program annotator for the Chicago Symphony Orchestra.