

# TCHAIKOVSKY *program notes*

## Polonaise from *Eugene Onegin* Pyotr Tchaikovsky

In 1877, the Russian soprano Yelizaveta Lavrovskaya approached Pyotr Tchaikovsky with a (literally) novel proposal: turn Alexander Pushkin's classic tome, *Eugene Onegin*, into an opera. Written entirely in verse, the novel would seem to lend itself to musical treatment; but initially, Tchaikovsky dismissed the idea as "wild," pointing out that the appeal of Pushkin's tale lay in the way it was told rather than the story itself.

The idea stuck with the composer, though, and after mulling it for a while he decided to undertake the project. He constructed the libretto using text straight from the book, and completed the whole opera in early 1878. "If ever music was written with sincere passion, with love for the story and the characters in it, it is the music for *Onegin*," Tchaikovsky wrote upon completing the score. "I trembled...with inexpressible delight while writing it."

The plot of *Eugene Onegin* is indeed pretty simple: an unsophisticated young country woman falls in love with Onegin, a sophisticated city gentleman; but he rejects her. Several years later, at a ball at a palace in St. Petersburg, Onegin sees the woman again; now she has transformed into an elegant princess. Recognizing the beauty that he had failed to see before, he pledges his love, but is himself spurned.

The opera's Polonaise is the music played at that palace ball. Composed in the form of a popular Polish dance, it bursts with rhythmic spirit and stateliness, providing a perfect canvas for the exhilarating moment when Onegin recognizes the beautiful princess.

## Piano Concerto No. 1 Pyotr Tchaikovsky

There is no greater melody-writer in the history of classical music than Tchaikovsky. His sense of line was almost too exquisite for his own good: If there is any knock against his music, it might be that his development

of musical ideas sometimes meant disassembling perfection.

Rarely are both sides of that equation so vividly evident as in the first moments of his First Piano Concerto. The thunderously dramatic, sweepingly lyrical opening bars present us with a melody as pure and immediately appealing as anything in the instrumental repertoire. But where to go from there?

The answer, it turns out, is: All over the musical and emotional map. In its first movement alone, the First Piano Concerto vaults manically between emotional extremes. Sometimes, the piano and orchestra seem to pull in opposing directions. The massive melody, so perfectly stated at the outset, is dissected, parodied, and abandoned — all within the first minutes, never to be heard again. Instead, the movement is stitched primarily from the threads of a tune borrowed from Ukrainian folk music.

After the epic journey of the first movement, Tchaikovsky gives us



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miniature interlude that's as lovely and languid as the previous music was intense and biting. Then comes the finale, a lively dance steeped again in the flavor of Ukrainian folk music.

Even today, the contrasts embedded in the First Piano Concerto can be a lot to digest. So perhaps the pianist Nikolai Rubinstein can be excused for his initial reaction to the concerto that Tchaikovsky, then a struggling young composer, presented to him on Christmas Eve, 1874.

"Nikolai asked me...to play the Concerto in a classroom of the Conservatory," Tchaikovsky later recounted. "I played through the first movement. Not a criticism, not a word...I kept my temper and played the Concerto through. Again, silence.

"'Well?' I said, and stood up. There burst forth from Rubinstein's mouth a mighty torrent of words. He spoke quietly at first; then he waxed hot, and at last he resembled Zeus hurling thunderbolts. It appeared that my Concerto was utterly worthless, absolutely unplayable..."

In the wake of the experience, Tchaikovsky made only one change to his score: He scratched out Rubinstein's name from the dedication page. In place, he penned the name of Hans Von Bulow, another great pianist who not only fell in love with the Concerto, but ultimately became its first great champion, performing it widely and to great acclaim.

Time has proven the composer's self-confidence right: This Concerto serves as the standard by which concert pianists are tested, while transporting audiences on a stirring emotional journey whenever it is performed.

#### **Symphony No. 4** **Pyotr Tchaikovsky**

Even by the standards of Tchaikovsky's drama-wracked and self-doubting life, the years 1877-1878 marked a very bad time for the composer.

The mess began, ironically, with a pledge of love from one of his former students, a 16-year-old girl named Antonina Milyukova. Tchaikovsky, a closeted but self-acknowledged homosexual in his late 30s, was confused by Milyukova's advances; he didn't even remember her. Nonetheless, after just

one meeting, he proposed marriage.

One of the greatest Romantic composers of all time probably should have known that this was not the way enduring love begins.

"After three days with (Milyukova's family) in the country, I begin to see that everything I can't stand in my wife derives from her beginning to a completely weird family," Tchaikovsky wrote to his sister — *during* the couple's honeymoon! Less than three months later, Tchaikovsky fled abroad, never to return to her.

Terrible as this experience was for both wife and husband, Tchaikovsky's marriage marked a turning point. For years, he had believed it possible to overcome his homosexuality, which he regarded with shame. After leaving his wife, he never again expressed the same self-torment regarding his sexuality (though he remained publicly closeted).

It was during this same period that Tchaikovsky penned his Fourth Symphony. Fittingly, fate proclaims itself at the outset of the first movement, with a blazing fanfare. The music then sprawls out across a vividly colorful sonic landscape that is at once more structurally fluid and internally coherent than any symphonic work previously produced by the composer.

"All life is an unbroken alternation of hard reality with swiftly passing dreams of happiness," Tchaikovsky later wrote in describing this first movement. He could have said the same about his life at the time.

And yet, with this symphony, it is as if Tchaikovsky finally found confidence in his own voice. The second movement, built around what seems like an endlessly flowing melody, is deliciously nostalgic with a touch of melancholy. Then comes a third movement that is arguably the composer's most daringly original symphonic statement: a hushed yet lively dance in which the three primary sections of the orchestra — woodwinds, brass, and strings (the latter playing without bows throughout) — engage in a playful game of musical hot-potato.

That leads to an explosive finale of unbridled joy. In the middle of it all, the Fate theme returns, but is quickly

vanquished by the inexorable flow of the music. "If you cannot discover reasons for happiness in yourself, look at others," Tchaikovsky later wrote in describing this music. "Rejoice in others' joys. To live is still possible!"

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