

Tchaikovsky's Swan Lake Suite
Program Notes
January 27 – 29, 2012

“Yes, those were horrible days for us, too, those days when Austria was attacked,” Bartók responded from Budapest on April 13, 1938 to his loyal friend in Basle, Switzerland, Mrs. Oscar Müller-Widmann. “The most frightful thing for us at the moment is that we face the threat of seeing Hungary also given over to this regime of bandits and murderers. I cannot imagine how I could live in such a country.... Strictly speaking, it would be my duty to exile myself, if that is still possible. But even under the most favorable auspices, it would cause me an enormous amount of trouble and moral anguish to earn my daily bread in a foreign country.... All this adds up to the same old problem, whether to go or stay.”

Given the unsettled and frightening political situation under which all eastern Europeans found themselves during the terrible days of 1938 and 1939, it is little wonder that Bartók's creativity was undermined. He managed to complete the Violin Concerto No. 2 in December 1938, but then found himself too preoccupied to undertake any further original work. Paul Sacher, the conductor of the Basle Chamber Orchestra and a close friend who had commissioned the *Music for Strings, Percussion and Celesta* two years before, recognized that Bartók needed to leave Budapest if his creativity was to be revived. Sacher invited the Bartóks to spend the summer of 1939 at his chalet at Saanen in the massif of Gruyère in Switzerland, and commissioned a new piece from him for his orchestra. Bartók accepted both of the invitations, and arrived at Saanen in July. Even in Switzerland, however, Bartók could not escape the ominous European political situation. “The poor, peaceful, honest Swiss are being compelled to burn with war-fever,” he wrote to his son Béla in Hungary on August 18th. “Their newspapers are full of military articles, they have taken defense measures on the more important passes, etc. — military preparedness. I saw this for myself on the Julier Pass; for example, boulders have been made into road-blocks against tanks, and such like attractions. It's the same in Holland. I do not like your going to Rumania — in such uncertain times it is unwise to go anywhere so unsafe. I am also worried whether I shall be able to get home from here if this or that happens.”

Once installed at Saanen, however, Bartók retreated into a welcome isolation to undertake Sacher's commission. “Fortunately I can put this [war] worry out of my mind if I have to — it does not disturb my work,” he continued in his letter to Béla. “Somehow I feel like a musician of olden times — the invited guest of a patron of the arts. For here I am, as you know, entirely the guest of the Sachers; they see to everything — from a distance. In a word, I am living alone — in an ethnographic object: a genuine peasant cottage. The furnishings are not in character, but so much the better, because they are the last word in comfort. They even had a piano brought from Berne for me.... The janitor's wife cooks and cleans, and my wish is her command. Recently, even the weather has been favoring me. However, I can't take advantage of the weather to make excursions: I have to work: a piece for Sacher himself (something for a string orchestra); in this respect also my position is like that of the old-time musician. Luckily the work went well, and I finished it in fifteen days (a piece of about 25 minutes). I just completed it yesterday.” The work was the Divertimento for String Orchestra, one of Bartók's most immediately accessible compositions. The halcyon Swiss interlude during which he produced this piece was not to last,

however. Almost as soon as he had begun the Sixth Quartet at Saanen, word came from Budapest of his beloved mother's death. He returned home immediately and spent the winter in Hungary, but in April 1940 he sailed to America for a concert tour with Joseph Szigeti. After an arduous journey home that summer to settle his affairs and collect his wife, he went back to New York in October and never again saw his native Hungary.

Bartók left no specific indication concerning his use of the 18th-century appellation for the *Divertimento*. Since the piece does not include the dance forms characteristic of that genre in Mozart's day, perhaps he meant the title to denote the music's predominantly high-spirited emotional content, or its use of the old *concerto grosso* technique of opposing a group of soloists to the larger body of the orchestra, or simply the situation in which it was composed, as he noted in his letters. At any rate, the only information that he gave about the *Divertimento* was a laconic response to Sacher's question about its form: "First movement, sonata form; second movement, approximately A-B-A; third movement, rondo-like."

The main theme of the opening sonata-form movement is a lively violin strain in swinging meter given above a steady accompaniment in the lower strings. The complementary melody, ushered in by widely spaced octaves, is presented by the soloists with interjections from the ensemble. The development section is intricately imitative, and spills over into the recapitulation, where the themes are subject to still further elaborations. (Concerning the extensive thematic working-out that marks so much of his music, Bartók once admitted, "The extremes of variation, which is so characteristic of folk music, is at the same time the expression of my own nature.") The somber nature of the second movement, which stands in strong contrast to the surrounding music, may well have been influenced by the tragic events of 1939. It is in a three-part form (A-B-A), whose outer sections, based on a restless, chromatic theme, enclose highly charged music that grows from a dramatic, repeated-note outcry of the violas. The joyous finale, which resumes the high spirits of the opening movement, is disposed in several sections, with the principal theme, first presented by the solo violin, returning to mark the movement's progress.

Halsey Stevens wrote that Bartók's *Divertimento* is "almost Mozartean in its buoyancy. It is the most spontaneous and carefree work of Bartók since the *Dance Suite*, and is without question the least problematical. The idiom is straightforward, the harmonies are simple and preponderantly triadic, the contrapuntal outlines clear, the structural patterns free from complexity."

* * *

Today, Béla Bartók's fame rests upon his reputation as a composer. His earliest notoriety, however, was as a pianist and folk music researcher. All three of these elements of his unique genius are reflected in his scintillating Second Piano Concerto.

Bartók made his first field expedition in search of the indigenous music of his native Hungary in 1905, with his colleague Zoltán Kodály. Their countryside discoveries shaped their futures. Kodály not only allowed the influence of this folk music to permeate his original compositions, but he also developed a system of music education based on folk models that revolutionized the teaching of the subject in Hungary. Bartók channeled his passion for folk music into volumes of indispensable scholarly research detailing a now virtually lost tradition, as well as into his original works. After a number of early

compositions in the Straussian mold, Bartók turned to folk music as the model for his melodies and even for the structural procedures that inform his works. “It has been observed that I place much emphasis on the work of technical elaboration, that I do not like to repeat a musical thought unchanged, and that I never repeat a technical detail unchanged,” he told the Belgian music scholar Denijs Dille in 1937. “This practice of mine arises from my inclination for variation and for transforming themes.... The extreme variety that characterizes our folk music is, at the same time, a manifestation of my own nature.” Later in that interview he cited the Second Piano Concerto as an example of his folk-inspired compositions.

As a pianist, Bartók had gained considerable renown by 1931, the year that he completed the Second Concerto. He had played his First Piano Concerto in most of the important music capitals of Europe, and in America during his first visit, in 1927, and felt that he needed a new piece to take on his tours, one that would be even more immediately appealing than the earlier Concerto. “I consider my First Concerto a successful work,” he wrote, “although its style is up to a point difficult, perhaps even very difficult for the orchestra and the public. And so I decided, a few years later, in 1930-1931, to compose my Second Concerto with less difficulties for the orchestra and more pleasant themes. This aim of mine explains the more popular and easier character of the greater part of the themes.” Despite the work’s “easier character,” Budapest, Bartók’s home, could not bring itself to be the first to hear the new piece (despite the glory that Bartók reflected on his native land, the Hungarian musical public gave only grudging acceptance to his works — most of his important compositions had to be premiered abroad), but in Frankfurt, Germany with conductor Hans Rosbaud in January 1933, sixteen months after it was completed. (That performance, in the year Hitler came to power, was the last time Bartók played in Germany.) Soon thereafter, Bartók made the rounds with the Concerto — London, Vienna, Stockholm, Zurich — but he did not play it in Budapest until 1938.

In his study of Bartók, Halsey Stevens wrote that the Second Piano Concerto is “a bravura piece almost without parallel in the literature.” It is Bartók’s most openly virtuosic keyboard concerto, and calls from the soloist a breathtaking display of technical dexterity and physical endurance. As always with this composer, however, underlying the brilliant surface of the piece are an unshakable musical logic and a structural integrity that trace their technique and ethos back to Beethoven’s greatest instrumental works. Despite its modal melodic twists, electric rhythms, acerbic harmonic language and percussive orchestration, Bartók’s Second Piano Concerto is very much a work in the great Classical tradition, a brilliant 20th-century renewal of the genre that is older than any other in the modern orchestral literature.

The Second Concerto is nominally in three movements — the traditional fast-slow-fast of the Classical model — but the division of the middle movement into a tripartite structure (*Adagio—Presto—Adagio*) creates a grand symmetrical form of five sections, with a whirling central scherzo flanked on either side, mirror-like, by slow music and a propulsive *Allegro*. Bartók’s fondness for such balanced formal types is well known. The Fourth (1928) and Fifth Quartets (1934) have a five-movement form which is similar to that of this Concerto. The themes in the opening movement of the *Concerto for Orchestra* are reversed on their return to create a symmetrical balance around the central point of the development; i.e., Main Theme (MT)—Second Theme (ST)—Development—ST—MT. The thematic material of the first movement of the *Music for Strings, Percussion and Celesta* is symmetrical and arched in shape; at the mid-point of the movement, the themes are turned upside down, their downward motion balancing their ascending outline

in the earlier pages. Further strengthening the symmetry in this Second Concerto is the varied recall of first movement's themes in the finale.

The Concerto's opening movement is largely spun from the two motives heard at the beginning: a joyous dance fragment initiated by the trumpet, and, following immediately, a thickly harmonized theme for the piano. The music is driving and percussive, a quality enhanced by the scoring, which dismisses the string instruments and uses only the winds, brass and percussion. A complementary theme, presented by piano and percussion alone, requires the keyboard to roll the chords in opposite directions (right hand up, left hand down) while the streams of harmony move in contrary motion. After further tightly reasoned elaborations of the themes comes the recapitulation — with the clearly recognizable themes recalled upside down. A slashing cadenza for the soloist and a coda in which both the original and inverted versions of the main theme are used bring this brilliant movement to a close.

The strings are first heard in the *Adagio*, an almost motionless chorale that is a kind of “Night Music,” as he called it, that Bartók often used in his slow movements. The central portion of the movement, the Concerto's scherzo, contrasts boldly with the surrounding music in its incessant rhythmic motion and vibrant energy. The return of the luminous “Night Music” rounds out the movement. The finale is an assertive rondo whose refrain theme is new, but whose episodes are built on transformations of melodies from the first movement.

* * *

During the years after Tchaikovsky took up his faculty position at the Moscow Conservatory in 1866, he fell in with a group of young men who unblushingly called themselves the Artistic Circle of Moscow, an informal tavern society whose members met regularly to impress each other with their theories of art and their capacity for alcohol. Among the Artistic Circle were Vladimir Begichev, stage manager of the Bolshoi Ballet, and Vasily Geltser, one of that company's finest dancers. Early in 1875, they conceived a new ballet for which their companion, Tchaikovsky, then the author of two symphonies, the tone poem *Romeo and Juliet* and a brand new Piano Concerto, would provide the music. Tchaikovsky liked the idea. He was drawn to the stage throughout his life, and had already undertaken four operas (though the first two, *The Voyevoda* and *Undine*, he largely destroyed except for some fragments plundered for later works, including the proposed ballet) and, in 1870, a ballet on the story of Cinderella, of which nothing more is known than it never got beyond a few discarded sketches. During a summer vacation in 1871 at the home in Kamenka of his sister, Alexandra, he even created a family ballet for her children. (“He invented the steps and the pirouettes, and he danced them himself, showing the performers what he required of them,” wrote Alexandra's son, Yuri. “At such moments Uncle Peter, red in the face, wet with perspiration as he sang the tune, presented a pretty amusing sight.”) Though the music and scenario of this parlor-room production have not survived, it is likely that some of its action and music were incorporated into the 1875 ballet. Begichev, on behalf of the directors of the Imperial Theaters of Moscow, offered Tchaikovsky 800 rubles to write the music; the libretto, based on German legend and Russian supernatural tales, was devised by Begichev, Geltser and the composer; and the title for the new work was borrowed from the children's summer ballet — *Swan Lake*. Tchaikovsky agreed to start the score as soon as he finished his Third Symphony during the summer break from his Conservatory classes.

Little is known about the composition of *Swan Lake*, though Tchaikovsky admitted to Rimsky-Korsakov that he did it “partly for the sake of the money, which I need, and partly because I wanted to try myself in this kind of music.” Tchaikovsky began the music in August 1875, and his brother Modeste recorded in his biography of Peter that the first two acts were sketched in a fortnight. The rest of the score came more slowly, however, hampered by Tchaikovsky’s classroom duties, and was not completed until the following April. Almost a full year passed before *Swan Lake* was staged. The choreography for the premiere (on March 4, 1877 at the Moscow Bolshoi Theater), a benefit for the ballerina Pelageya Karpakova, who took the role of Odette, was created by the company’s dance master, Julius Reisinger, “whose limitations as a choreographer seem to have been almost boundless,” according to Tchaikovsky’s biographer David Brown. Stepan Ryabov, whom Modeste criticized as a “semi-amateur” and incapable of grasping the symphonic nature of his brother’s score, was assigned to prepare the orchestra. Well-worn sets and costumes from other Bolshoi ballet and opera productions were pressed into service for the premiere. Though essentially a fine company, the Bolshoi dancers were apparently uninspired by Tchaikovsky’s music, some of which they considered “undanceable,” and could not overcome a decided indifference in their performance. Given the threadbare decor, the routine orchestral playing and the unimaginative choreography (Edwin Evans said the premiere was “more or less pitchforked onto the stage”), it is small wonder that *Swan Lake* made little impression on the first-night audience and critics, who were also put off by such a bold, symphonic score after years of listening to the feather-weight, tinkly ballet music of Pugni, Minkus, Drigo and Gerber. Substitutions had already been made in the score for the premiere (Karpakova wanted to show her fans some of their familiar favorites), and further changes continued to be allowed until hardly more than half of Tchaikovsky’s original music remained. *Swan Lake* stayed in the Bolshoi repertory until the costumes fell apart in 1883, and, except for a staging in Prague of Act II in 1888, when Tchaikovsky met Dvorák, the ballet was not seen again during its composer’s lifetime.

Mixed with the grief following Tchaikovsky’s death in 1893 was a strong curiosity about his less familiar works. Ivan Vsevolozhsky, director of St. Petersburg’s Maryinsky Theater, and the choreographer Marius Petipa, who had collaborated with Tchaikovsky in creating the successful *Sleeping Beauty* and *Nutcracker* ballets, determined to revive the full, original version of *Swan Lake*. They gave Act II alone as part of a memorial concert in St. Petersburg on February 29, 1894, and staged the full ballet on January 27th of the following year. The lovingly prepared production created a sensation, and *Swan Lake* has ever since been one of the most popular of all evening-length ballets.

Act I of *Swan Lake* is a festival celebrating the coming of age of Prince Siegfried the following day, when he must choose a bride. Attracted by a flight of swans over the castle, Siegfried and his friends form a hunting party and leave the festivity. At the beginning of Act II, Siegfried arrives at the lake to see the swans, led by Odette, the Swan Queen, glide across the surface. Just as Siegfried is about to unleash his crossbow, Odette appears to him not in avian form, but as a beautiful princess. She tells him that she and the other swan-maidens live under a curse by the evil magician Rothbart which lets them take human shape just from midnight to dawn. The spell can be broken, she says, only by one who promises to love her and no other. Though Rothbart vows to undo them both, Siegfried promises his love to Odette. Act III is again set in the castle. Amid the birthday celebration, Rothbart, in disguise, suddenly enters with his daughter, Odile, who appears to Siegfried in the exact image of Odette. Odette, hovering at the window,

tries to warn Siegfried of the deception, but to no avail. Siegfried asks for Odile's hand in marriage. Rothbart and Odile exult in their vile triumph. Siegfried realizes he has been trapped. Odette seems doomed. In Act IV, Odette returns to the lake, prepared to kill herself. The other maidens urge her to wait for the Prince. He appears, and again vows his love to her, but she knows that Rothbart's power can only be broken by death. She throws herself from the parapet of a lakeside fortress. Siegfried, his life meaningless without her, follows. Rothbart's enchantment is destroyed by the power of love. At the final curtain, Odette and Siegfried are seen sailing off together on a beautiful, celestial ship, united forever.

Tchaikovsky's music for *Swan Lake*, which matches the grandeur, power and variety of the story's libretto, was among the earliest ballet scores to elevate the dance to the level of serious drama by incorporating methods of operatic and symphonic design: it was probably the first ballet in which recurring themes were employed to evoke characters and situations, much in the manner of Wagner's *leitmotif* technique; it balanced opposing tonal areas to depict the brilliant world of Siegfried's castle and the mysterious setting of Odette's lake; it carefully delineated the story's dramatic progression through appropriate music, building to a sweeping apotheosis at the end. "[No] tragic ballet has surpassed *Swan Lake* in combining atmosphere (whether gay or sinister), feeling (whether joyful or sorrowful), movement (whether swift or languorous) with the civilized grace and refinement of the elegant, artificial world of a highly stylized dance idiom," wrote David Brown.

The opening *Scene* introduces the haunting Swan Theme. The brilliant *Valse* is danced during Siegfried's birthday festivities in Act I. The *Dance of the Swans* from Act II is performed by the maidens to an idyllic waltz melody. The *Scene* that opens Act II is based on the haunting oboe theme associated throughout the ballet with the swans. The *Hungarian Dance (Czardas)*, *Spanish Dance*, *Neapolitan Dance* and *Mazurka* occur during the party scene in Act III.

©2012 Dr. Richard E. Rodda

To learn more about the music, please attend the Pre-Concert Conversations one hour before each evening Masterworks concert.