

# Program Notes for Tchaikovsky's Piano Concerto No. 1

## Jan. 29-31

### Symphony No. 3 in D major, Op. 29, "Polish" PETER ILYICH TCHAIKOVSKY (1840-1893)

*Composed in 1875.*

*Premiered on November 19, 1875 in Moscow, conducted by Nikolai Rubinstein.*

Tchaikovsky composed his Third Symphony in the astonishingly short period of only eight weeks during the summer of 1875 — astonishing not just because of the speed with which such a large work was written, but also because it was composed immediately after one of the worst episodes of depression and self-deprecation that he ever experienced. On the preceding Christmas Eve, he had taken his new B-flat minor Piano Concerto to Nikolai Rubinstein, director of the Moscow Conservatory and his boss, for his evaluation. Rubinstein vilified it. Tchaikovsky was both enraged and wounded. His always-delicate nerves gave way, and his doctors advised him to travel abroad, forbidding him to compose or touch a piano, which counsel he ignored to stay in winter-bound Moscow to continue his teaching duties at the Conservatory.

On January 21, 1875, Tchaikovsky wrote to his brother Anatoli of the underlying cause of his malaise: "I am very, very lonely here, and if it weren't for my constant work, I should simply succumb to my melancholia. It's a fact that XXX [his symbol in his correspondence and diaries for his homosexuality] constitutes an unbridgeable chasm between me and the majority of people. It imparts to my character an aloofness, a fear of people, a timidity, an excessive shyness, a distrustfulness — in a word, a thousand traits which are making me more and more unsociable." He admitted to Modeste, Anatoli's twin, that he was so disgusted with his life that he often considered suicide. He could rouse little enthusiasm for creative work during those months, composing only the bittersweet *Sérénade Mélancolique* for Violin and Orchestra (Op. 26) for Leopold Auer and a handful of songs. These latter works, as with most of the songs that he wrote, were a musical marking-time, written when he could not bring himself to undertake larger projects. The only solution to his problem, he believed, was to marry, as a sign to himself and to the world that he was capable of living a conventional life. "From this day on I will seriously consider entering into matrimony with any woman," he wrote to Modeste on September 22, 1876. "I am convinced that my *inclinations* are the greatest and insuperable barrier to my well-being, and I must by all means struggle against my nature." He finally did marry, in 1877 — to one of his students — and it was a complete disaster. His marital catastrophe did serve, however, to exorcise at least some of his personal devils, and he became more contented with himself thereafter.

Tchaikovsky's gloom of the winter of 1875 lifted when the weather improved. He reported to Anatoli on March 21st, "Now, with the approach of spring, these attacks of melancholia have completely stopped, but," he added pessimistically, "I *know* that each year — or rather, each winter — they will return more strongly." His mood was further improved in May, when he received the commission for *Swan Lake* from the Imperial Directorate of the Moscow Theaters, a project he longed to undertake since conceiving a passion for the ballet music of Delibes during a trip to France sometime before. As soon as classes at the Conservatory finished in June, he accepted an invitation to visit the country estate of his friend Vladimir Shilovsky at Ussovo, where he began the Third Symphony. The sketches were completed by the end of the month, when he moved to the estate of N.D. Kondratiev at Nizi; he orchestrated the fourth and fifth movements in just five days after his arrival on July 10th. His final stop of the summer was at his sister Alexandra's home in Verbovka, where the three remaining movements were orchestrated in about a week. Tchaikovsky was refreshed at Verbovka not just by completing the Symphony and having begun *Swan Lake*, but also by the loving attention of his sister, her children and his father, so that he was able to return to Moscow in the fall stronger both physically and mentally.

For the fee of 300 rubles, the Moscow branch of the Russian Musical Society and its director, Nikolai

Rubinstein, were given the rights to the premiere of the Third Symphony. Rehearsals began early in November, and the piece was first performed on the 19th of the month to a warm response. Tchaikovsky assessed the event and the music in a letter to Rimsky-Korsakov: "It seems to me the work does not contain any very happy ideas, but, as regards form, it is a step forward. I am best pleased with the first movement, and also with the two scherzos, the second of which is very difficult, consequently not nearly so well played as it might have been if we could have had more rehearsals.... On the whole, however, I was satisfied with the performance." When the work was played in St. Petersburg early in 1876, Tchaikovsky reported to Modeste, "My Symphony went well and had considerable success. They called out and applauded me in a very friendly way." The critic Hermann Laroche was unstinting in his praise. "The importance and power of the music," he wrote, "the beauty and variety of forms, the nobility of style, the original and rare perfection of technique, all contribute to make this Symphony one of the most remarkable works produced during the last ten years. Were it to be played in any musical center in Germany, it would raise the name of the Russian musician to a level with those of the most famous symphonic composers of the day." Not all agreed with Laroche, however, and the composer was soon worried because "the press ... has been rather cold toward my Symphony. They are all agreed that it contains nothing new and that I am beginning to repeat myself. Is this really so?" he asked Modeste. His fears were allayed the following summer when he attended the first Bayreuth Festival as a press correspondent, but was received as a distinguished visitor whose presence incited "one long confusion of hospitality," he marveled. "It appears that I am not so unknown in Western Europe as I thought."

The sobriquet "Polish" attached to the D major Symphony (the only one of Tchaikovsky's six symphonies in a major key) did not originate with the composer, but seems to have first been appended by Sir August Friedrich Manns when he conducted the work at a London Crystal Palace concert in 1899. Manns' inspiration was the stylized polonaise used as the finale, though there is no question that the Symphony is thoroughly Russian in spirit and thoroughly Tchaikovskian in manner. The model for this five-movement work may well have been Schumann's "Rhenish" Symphony, which Tchaikovsky held in high esteem. Instead of adding a slow movement to the traditional four-movement structure, as Schumann had done to depict a grand ceremony in the Cologne Cathedral, however, Tchaikovsky inserted a waltz before the slow movement.

The Symphony opens with a doleful introduction based on a fragmented idea passed between the strings and the horns. The sonata form proper begins with the change to a brighter key and the presentation of the sweeping main theme; the subsidiary theme is a sad, little melody intoned by the solo oboe. A buoyant tune initiated by the clarinets closes the exposition. All three themes are elaborated in the development section. The recapitulation recalls the melodies in their original forms before one of Tchaikovsky's most exciting codas ends the movement. The second movement, *Alla Tedesca* ("In the German Manner"), traces its waltz heritage to Glinka's *Valse-Fantasie*, Weber's *Invitation to the Dance* and, ultimately, the Austrian peasant dance, the *Ländler*. The movement's central trio is built on quick, chattering woodwind figures, which continue as accompaniment when the waltz theme returns. The elegiac *Andante* takes as its principal subject a plangent melody intoned by the woodwinds; a passionate strain for full orchestra provides formal and expressive balance. The *Scherzo* is indebted to Mendelssohn for its mercurial grace and to Tchaikovsky's own 1872 cantata celebrating the 200th anniversary of the birth of Peter the Great for the theme of its trio. The finale (*Tempo di Polacca*) is a majestic polonaise which encompasses episodes based on a broad complementary theme and an imposing amount of fugal development.

### **Concerto No. 1 for Piano and Orchestra in B-flat minor, Op. 23** **PETER ILYICH TCHAIKOVSKY**

*Composed in 1874-1875; revised in 1889.*

*Premiered on October 25, 1875 in Boston, with Hans von Bülow as soloist.*

These days, when the music of Tchaikovsky is among the most popular in the repertory, it is difficult to imagine the composer as a young man, known only to a limited public, and trying valiantly to solve that most pressing of all problems for the budding artist — making a living. In 1874, he was teaching at the

Moscow Conservatory and writing music criticism for a local journal. These duties provided a modest income, but Tchaikovsky's real interest lay in composition, and he was frustrated with the time they took from his creative work. He had already stolen enough hours to produce a sizeable body of music, but only *Romeo and Juliet* and the Symphony No. 2 had raised much enthusiasm. At the end of the year, he began a piano concerto with the hope of having a success great enough to allow him to leave his irksome post at the Conservatory. By late December, he had largely sketched out the work, and, having only a limited technique as a pianist, he sought the advice of Nikolai Rubinstein, Director of the Moscow Conservatory and an excellent player. Tchaikovsky reported the interview in a letter:

"On Christmas Eve 1874 ... Nikolai asked me ... to play the Concerto in a classroom of the Conservatory. We agreed to it... I played through the first movement. Not a criticism, not a word. Rubinstein said nothing... I did not need any judgment on the artistic form of my work; there was question only about its mechanical details. This silence of Rubinstein said much. It said to me at once: 'Dear friend, how can I talk about details when I dislike your composition as a whole?' But 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; passages were so commonplace and awkward that they could not be improved; the piece as a whole was bad, trivial, vulgar. I had stolen this from that one and that from this one; so only two or three pages were good for anything, while the others should be wiped out or radically rewritten. I cannot produce for you the main thing: the tone in which he said all this. An impartial bystander would necessarily have believed that I was a stupid, ignorant, conceited note-scratcher, who was so impudent as to show his scribble to a celebrated man."

Tchaikovsky was furious, and stormed out of the classroom. He made only one change in the score: he obliterated the name of the original dedicatee — Nikolai Rubinstein — and substituted that of the virtuoso pianist Hans von Bülow, who was performing Tchaikovsky's piano pieces across Europe. Bülow gladly accepted the dedication and wrote a letter of praise to Tchaikovsky as soon as he received the score: "The ideas are so original, so powerful; the details are so interesting, and though there are many of them they do not impair the clarity and unity of the work. The form is so mature, so ripe and distinguished in style; intention and labor are everywhere concealed. I would weary you if I were to enumerate all the characteristics of your work, characteristics which compel me to congratulate equally the composer and those who are destined to enjoy it."

After the scathing criticism from Rubinstein, Tchaikovsky was delighted to receive such a response, and was further gratified when Bülow asked to program the premiere on his upcoming American tour. The Concerto created such a sensation when it was first heard, in Boston on October 25, 1875, that Bülow played it on 139 of his 172 concerts that season. Such a success must at first have puzzled Rubinstein, but eventually he and Tchaikovsky reconciled their differences over the work. Tchaikovsky incorporated some of his suggestions in the 1889 revision, and Rubinstein not only accepted the Concerto, but eventually made it one of the staples of his performing repertory. During the next four years, when Tchaikovsky wrote *Swan Lake*, the *Rococo Variations*, the Third and Fourth Symphonies, the Violin Concerto, and, in 1877, met his benefactress Nadezhda von Meck, he was not only successful enough to leave his teaching job to devote himself entirely to composition, but he also became recognized as one of the greatest composers of the day.

Tchaikovsky's First Piano Concerto opens with the familiar theme of the introduction, a sweeping melody in D-flat major nobly sung by violins and cellos above thunderous chords from the piano. After a brief cadenza for the soloist, the theme — which is not heard again anywhere in the Concerto — is presented a second time in an even grander setting. Following a decrescendo and a pause, the piano presents the snapping main theme, in which the dark-hued nominal tonality of the work, B-flat minor, is finally achieved. (Tchaikovsky said that this curious first theme was inspired by a tune he heard sung by a blind beggar at a street fair.) Following a skillful discussion of the opening theme by piano and woodwinds, the clarinet

announces the lyrical, bittersweet second theme. A smooth, complementary phrase is played by the violins. This complementary phrase and the snapping motive from the main theme are combined in the movement's impassioned development section. The recapitulation returns the themes of the exposition in altered settings. (The oboe is awarded the second theme here.) An energetic cadenza and a coda derived from the second theme bring this splendid movement to a rousing close.

The simplicity of the second movement's three-part structure (A-B-A) is augured by the purity of its opening — a languid melody wrapped in the silvery tones of the solo flute, accompanied by quiet, plucked chords from the strings. The piano takes over the theme, provides it with rippling decorations, and passes it on to the cellos. The center of the movement is of very different character, with a quick tempo and a swift, balletic melody. The languid theme and moonlit mood of the first section return to round out the movement.

The crisp rhythmic motive presented immediately at the beginning of the finale and then spun into a complete theme by the soloist dominates much of the last movement. In the theme's vigorous full-orchestra guise, it has much of the spirit of a robust Cossack dance. To balance the impetuous vigor of this music, Tchaikovsky introduced a contrasting theme, a romantic melody first entrusted to the violins. The dancing Cossacks repeatedly advance upon this bit of tenderness, which shows a hardy determination to dominate the movement. The two themes contend, but it is the flying Cossacks who have the last word to bring this Concerto to an exhilarating finish.

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