

PETER ILYICH TCHAIKOVSKY

Composer

(Votkinsk, Russia, 1840 — St. Petersburg, 1893)

SYMPHONY NO. 2 IN C MINOR, OP. 17, “LITTLE RUSSIAN”

Composed: 1872-1873, revised 1879-1880

Premiered: February 7, 1873 in Moscow, conducted by Nicholas Rubinstein

Duration: ca. 33 minutes

Scoring: woodwinds in pairs plus piccolo, four horns, two trumpets, three trombones and tuba, timpani, percussion and strings

Overview

Looking back through the mists of well over a century to the last decades of Imperial Russia, it might at first seem that an unwavering unanimity joined together the music from Glinka through Borodin, Mussorgsky, Rimsky-Korsakov and Tchaikovsky to Scriabin and Rachmaninoff. Upon closer examination of the lives and philosophies of these men, however, bitter enmities are revealed. The group of musical nationalists known in the West as “The Five” — Cui, Borodin, Mussorgsky, Balakirev and Rimsky-Korsakov — were all amateur musicians determined to establish a distinctly Russian school of composition based on native folk and church music, history and lore. In this, they followed the lead of Mikhail Glinka, revered as the father of Russian concert music. They belligerently defended their untutored status on the basis that their lack of formal training freed them from German musical hegemony and allowed them to penetrate more directly into the heart of the Russian ethos. They looked upon the Russian graduates of the leading conservatories almost as traitors to the nationalistic cause they espoused, and Tchaikovsky was among their most favored targets. For his part, the well-trained Tchaikovsky could hardly help but look down on the rough-hewn music of The Five. He once castigated Mussorgsky’s work in a letter to his brother Modeste as “the lowest, commonest parody of music; it may go to the devil for all I care.”

Still, there was inevitably frequent contact between these two factions, and eventually a *laissez-faire* understanding was achieved. Rimsky decided to forsake the ranks of the uneducated, and he taught himself the techniques of music well enough to eventually become Russia’s most respected pedagogue, numbering Stravinsky and Respighi among his students. Tchaikovsky, though critical of their lack of professionalism, always respected the raw talent of the little group of nationalists, and he even agreed with their ideal of fostering a distinctly Russian music. Like them, he felt drawn to the native traditions of his homeland, and once wrote to his benefactress, Mme von Meck, “As regards the Russian element in general in my music (i.e., the instances of melody and harmony originating in folksong), I grew up in the backwoods, saturating myself from earliest childhood with the inexplicable beauty of the characteristic traits of Russian folksong.” Unlike The Five, however, who felt that a free fantasia form could best express their ideas, Tchaikovsky believed that the Russian influence should be channeled into traditional, Classical forms. It is therefore not hard to understand why Tchaikovsky was the first Russian composer widely appreciated in the Western world, whose tastes had so long been dominated by German music.

Despite their underlying differences, there were at least two significant instances in Tchaikovsky's early life when he was musically drawn to The Five. One was when Balakirev suggested the topic and even the structure for his 1869 tone poem, *Romeo and Juliet*. Another was in this Second Symphony. After an exhausting year of teaching, composing and writing music criticism in Moscow, Tchaikovsky visited his beloved sister, Alexandra, in Kamenka in Ukraine in June 1872. He was refreshed during the summer months not only by the time spent with his family, but also by the chance to return to the country and its people. Among the things that he enjoyed most was hearing the peasants sing, and it may have been that rustic music which inspired the Second Symphony, just as it did many of the works of The Five. It was Tchaikovsky's use in this Symphony of three folk tunes that he may have heard in Kamenka that caused the work to be nicknamed "Little Russian" by the critic Nicholas Kashkin in 1896. The diminutive referred not to any characteristic of the work but rather to the Ukrainian region from which Tchaikovsky borrowed his themes, known in Tsarist days as "Little Russia."

After beginning the Symphony in Kamenka, Tchaikovsky continued work on it in Ussovo and Moscow, completing much of the orchestration by November. In January he journeyed to St. Petersburg for a meeting with the management of the Imperial Opera about tentative plans to produce his opera *The Oprichnik*, and took along the manuscript for his new Symphony, the finale of which he played for Rimsky-Korsakov and his family. "The whole company nearly tore me to pieces in rapture," he reported, "and Mme Korsakov, with tears in her eyes, asked if she might arrange it for piano duet." A similar success greeted the work at its premiere, and it was immediately scheduled for another performance, at which the composer was called to the stage following every movement and, at the close of the concert, presented with a silver goblet and laurel wreath. Despite the acclaim achieved by this Symphony, however, Tchaikovsky eschewed membership in The Five, and he soon returned to the traditional, Germanic symphonic forms in which he cast the masterpieces of his later years.

What To Listen For

Tchaikovsky worked so furiously on this Symphony during the autumn of 1872 that he apologized in a letter of November 14th to his brother Modeste for not writing more regularly. About the new composition he added, "It seems to me to be my best work, at least as regards correctness of form." By 1879, however, he had decided that the Symphony was flawed, and he undertook its extensive revision, completely rewriting the opening movement, radically revising the Scherzo, and making a large cut in the finale. It is the revised version that is usually performed today. The first movement is prefaced by a slow introduction based on a variant of the traditional Russian song *Down by Mother Volga*. The plaintive theme is first intoned by the solo horn before it is given a lengthy consideration by the rest of the orchestra. The movement's sonata form begins with a quickening of the tempo and the presentation of the main theme, a vigorous, stormy strain with a grand, balletic sweep. The secondary theme is presented almost immediately. Introduced by the clarinet, its lyricism, gentleness and yearning make a strong contrast with the preceding theme. In the energetic development section these two melodies are intertwined with the folk tune from the introduction, a structural device Tchaikovsky had first employed in *Romeo and Juliet* to join the introduction more closely with the rest of the work. A massive climax ends the development and leads into the recapitulation of the stormy main theme and the yearning complementary melody, this latter here sung by the oboe. The closing pages

bring the movement around full circle, with a quiet reminder of *Down by Mother Volga* from horn and bassoon.

The second movement was taken whole from *Undine*, Tchaikovsky's unsuccessful opera of 1869. Having failed to secure its performance, the composer destroyed the score of the work except for this excerpt and a few other fragments. In the opera, this music was used as a wedding march, though one considerably more subdued in character than the similar pieces by Mendelssohn and Wagner, and in the Symphony it takes the place of the slow movement. The center of this three-part movement (A–B–A) is a treatment of *Spin, My Spinner* — one of the *Fifty Russian Folksongs* that Tchaikovsky arranged for publication in 1868-1869 — begun by the clarinet accompanied by icy, octave figurations in the flutes. The third movement is a quicksilver Scherzo, much indebted to the music of Borodin and Rimsky-Korsakov, whose central trio shifts rhythmic gears into a jaunty duple meter.

“Magnificent” was the rare complimentary word the finale brought from César Cui, the least-known member of The Five and one of Tchaikovsky's bitterest musical enemies. The movement, a dazzling display of orchestral color and rhythmic exuberance, is a set of variations on the Ukrainian tune *The Crane*. A slow introduction for full orchestra presents the basic shape of the melody before the variations are begun by the strings. The tiny tune is presented over and over, each time appearing in a different orchestral vestment so that the variations are based as much on changing tone color as on melodic manipulation. (Tchaikovsky admitted deriving this technique from Glinka's influential orchestral miniature *Kamarinskaya*, which he called “the acorn from which the oak of Russian music grew.”) As a foil to the movement's propulsive rhythmic energy, Tchaikovsky added a lyrical melody, first heard in the violins and then repeated by the flutes. Joyous festivity, however, is at the heart of this music, and it is not kept long at bay by tender sentiment. The finale gathers momentum as it goes, becoming a swirling, fiery Cossack dance driven by one of the most athletic displays of rhythmic electricity to be found in Tchaikovsky's (or anyone else's) music.

Herbert Weinstock had the following praise for the Second Symphony in his biography of Tchaikovsky: “Not often after Beethoven did any composer write a true symphony that so effortlessly and well answered every artistic query it asked. Because it is music-making in the eighteenth-century sense, music made for its own beauties and not direct personal communication, it lacks the blackly somber note that has been called Tchaikovskyian. Other Russian composers, and Peter Ilyich himself, have composed symphonies in which there are weightier material, greater isolated beauties, more originality, and more profundity. None has exceeded this one in achieving exactly the form required by its melodic content.”

WITOLD LUTOSŁAWSKI

Composer, Conductor

(Warsaw, 1913 — Warsaw, 1994)

CONCERTO FOR ORCHESTRA

Composed: 1950-1954

Premiered: November 26, 1954 in Warsaw, conducted by Witold Rowicki

Duration: ca. 28 minutes

Scoring: two piccolos, three flutes, three oboes, English horn, three clarinets, bass clarinet, three bassoons, contrabassoon, four horns, four trumpets, four trombones, tuba, timpani, percussion, celesta, two harps, piano and strings

Overview

Witold Lutosławski was among the giants of late-20th-century music. Born into a highly cultured family in Warsaw, Poland on January 25, 1913, Lutosławski took up piano and violin as a teenager before entering the Warsaw Conservatory to study keyboard and composition. His first important work, the *Symphonic Variations* (1938), dates from the year after his graduation. He supported himself during the difficult years of World War II, when he was in constant fear of deportation, as a pianist in the Warsaw cafés. At that time, he also worked on his First Symphony, which was condemned following its 1947 premiere for not conforming to the government-prescribed style of “socialist realism.” Many of his works of the following decade avoided “formalism” by deriving their melodic and harmonic inspiration from folk songs and dances, a period that culminated in the splendid *Concerto for Orchestra* of 1950-1954. After the *Funeral Music* for String Orchestra of 1957, Lutosławski’s music was written in a more decidedly modern idiom, akin in some respects to 12-tone serialism but still individual in its formal strength, colorful sonority, lucid texture and emotional power. His last works, notably the Third (1983) and Fourth (1992) Symphonies and the Piano Concerto (1987), turned to an idiom that is less dissonant, dense, complicated and unpredictable, and more lucid and obviously melodic than the compositions of the preceding two decades. In summarizing the style of Lutosławski’s music, Bohdan Pocij wrote, “For him sound is primary, but this does not mean that he tends in the direction of impressionism; rather the superior position given to sound quality is combined with an unusually acute sense of proportion and of the expressive capacities of shape. The sources of his music may be traced to the deepest and most vital European traditions, and he has renewed and developed currents of musical thought basic to those traditions: the idea of form in sound as a manifestation of beauty and the idea of dramatic form generated by conflict.”

What To Listen For

The composer gave the following account of the genesis of his *Concerto for Orchestra*: “In 1945, the Polish Music Publishing Company — which had just been established — asked me to compose a series of easy pieces based on Polish folk song and dance themes. I readily accepted this proposition and began for the first time to introduce elements of folk music into my work. Soon afterwards I accepted several similar commissions and in this way I came to compose a series of works based on Polish folk tunes. Among these are my ‘Little Suite’ for orchestra, ‘Bucolics’ for piano, etc. I did not attach any great importance to these works and treated them merely as a side-line to my real work as a composer. At this time I was busy above all on my First Symphony and later on my Overture for Strings and on problems of composition technique which were entirely unconnected with folk music. At the same time, however, the whole series of ‘functional’ pieces which I wrote based on folk themes gave me the possibility of developing a style which though narrow and limited, was nevertheless characteristic enough. This mainly involved blending simple diatonic motifs with chromatic atonal counterpoint, and with non-

functional, multicolored, capricious harmonies. The rhythmic transformation of these motifs, and the polymetrical texture resulting from them together with the accompanying elements are a part of the characteristic style which I have mentioned. In doing all this, I thought at the time that this marginal style would not be entirely fruitless and that despite its having come into being while I was writing typical ‘functional’ music, I could possibly make use of it in writing something more serious. A suitable opportunity for putting this into practice soon turned up. This was in 1950. The director of the Warsaw Philharmonic Orchestra, Witold Rowicki, asked me to write something especially for his new ensemble. This was to be something not difficult, but which could, however, give the young orchestra an opportunity to show its qualities. I started to work on the new score not realizing that I was to spend nearly four years on it. Folk music and all that follows with it — of which I have already spoken — was to be used in my new work. Folk music has in this work, however, been merely a raw material used to build a large musical form of several movements which does not in the least originate either from folk songs or from folk dances. A work came into being, which I could not help including among my most important works, as a result of my episodic symbiosis with folk music and in a way that was for me somewhat unexpected. This work is the *Concerto for Orchestra*. It seems to me that my possibilities of making use of folk themes have been almost completely exhausted in this score.”

Like Bartók’s familiar work of the same title, Lutosławski’s *Concerto for Orchestra* allows each orchestral section solo opportunities, creating a richly varied kaleidoscope of instrumental colors enlivened by a clear and invigorating harmonic palette and a bursting rhythmic energy. The first movement is titled *Intrada*, a term used in the 16th and 17th centuries for the festive opening piece of a musical evening. Lutosławski’s *Intrada* begins over a gigantic sustained pedal-point in the basses and proceeds through several sections that are played in reverse order after the movement’s central point to create a symmetrical, mirror-like structure with the pedal-point and its decorating themes returning at the end to round out the form. The second movement (*Capriccio notturno e Arioso*) opens and closes with skittering music that brings to mind the whirrings and buzzings of a country summer night. The *Arioso* at the movement’s center, initiated by unison trumpets, is an extended melody given above heavy accompanimental punctuations. The finale comprises three continuous sections — *Passacaglia*, a set of increasingly elaborate variations around an unchanging melody, first played by the basses; *Toccata*, a vibrantly rhythmic stanza commencing after the *Passacaglia* fades into silence; and *Chorale*, begun by oboes and clarinets and growing through the full ensemble to stentorian proportions.

PETER ILYICH TCHAIKOVSKY

1812, OVERTURE SOLENNELLE, OP. 49

Composed: 1880

Premiered: August 20, 1882 in Moscow, conducted by Eduard Nápravník

Duration: ca. 16 minutes

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

Overview

The Russian penchant for myth-making extends, of course, to her warfare. It is therefore not surprising that Napoleon's strategic withdrawal from Moscow in 1812 came to be regarded in Russia as a great military victory achieved through cunning and resourcefulness, conveniently ignoring the French General Ney's report that "general famine and general winter, rather than Russian bullets, conquered the Grand Army."

Nearly seventy years later, the Cathedral of Christ the Redeemer was erected in Moscow to commemorate the events of 1812. For the Cathedral's consecration, Nikolai Rubinstein, head of the Moscow Conservatory and director of the Russian Musical Society, planned a celebratory festival of music, and in 1880 he asked Tchaikovsky to write a work for the occasion. Tchaikovsky was never enthusiastic about composing to commission. On October 10th, however, he wrote to Mme. von Meck, "Nothing is more unpleasant to me than the manufacturing of music for such occasions.... But — I have not the courage to refuse [Rubinstein's proposal]."

The original plans for the work included a grand outdoor performance in Kremlin Square by a large orchestra augmented by brass band, bells and cannon. The cannon shots were notated precisely in the score, and were to be triggered by electrical relay from the conductor's desk. The 5,000 bells of Moscow's steeples — whose thunderous combined tintinnabulation was said to make conversation impossible — were to chime in at the work's climax. There is no record, however, that this grandiose performance ever happened. Seemingly never having heard the work, Tchaikovsky wrote to the conductor Eduard Nápravník in 1881, "Last winter, at Nikolai Rubinstein's request, I composed a Festival Overture for the concerts of the exhibition, entitled *1812*. Could you possibly arrange to have this played? It is not of great value, and I shall not be at all surprised or hurt if you consider the style of the music unsuitable to a symphony concert." Nápravník gave the apparent premiere on August 20, 1882 in Moscow.

What To Listen For

The Overture represents the conflict — militarily and musically — of Russia and France, and the eventual Russian "victory" over the invaders. It opens with a dark, brooding setting of the Russian hymn *God, Preserve Thy People* for violas and cellos. The full orchestra is gradually collected up as the section progresses to make a splendid climax. The French forces appear to the sound of thumping drums and the martial strains of the *Marseillaise*. The battle is joined with ingenious orchestral interplay, through which are heard fragments of the French marching song. Two Slavic melodies ensue. One Tchaikovsky rescued from his first opera, *The Voyevoda*; the other is a Novgorod folksong that he first set for piano duet in 1868-1869 as one of his *Fifty Russian Folk Songs*. The sequence of battle—opera theme—folk song is reiterated. Following a huge *rallentando* (slowing-down) passage that occupies three full pages in the score, the opening hymn returns in a grand setting for wind and brass choir reinforced with bells. The *Marseillaise* reappears, but is vanquished by the artillery fusillade and the triumphant rendition of the Russian national hymn, *God, Save the Czar*, by trombones, horns and low strings. (It is a curious historical footnote that neither the French nor Russian melodies Tchaikovsky used in this Overture could have been heard in 1812. The Russian hymn was composed by Alexis Lvov in

1833, and the revolutionary French anthem was banned when Napoleon proclaimed himself emperor in 1804.) The *1812* is one of music's most invigorating experiences — it never fails to rouse the spirits and stir the blood.

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