

Tchaikovsky Celebration

Violin Concerto in D Major, opus 35--Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky

Most probably, no composer other than Beethoven has enjoyed the popularity in this country than that of Pyotr Tchaikovsky. His reputation has been secure since his early maturity, and yet, it is equally true that no other major modern composer has endured the distortions and indignities as that imposed upon his personality and personal life after his death. A welter of factors have been trotted out to “explain” his art and its personal genesis: his sexuality, politics, religious beliefs, social class. Every generation of musicologists--radical and otherwise, social commentators, and political ideologues has taken its shots at the man. And it must be said, chief among the negative attitudes simply has been the implication that his music is vulgar, overly emotional, and void of intellectual attainment--all clearly a reflection of the composer, himself!

That said, it is refreshing to see that much of the critical persiflage of the last century is now being replaced by a clearer, less ideologically freighted appreciation. He is historically important for his integration of the symphonic tradition of Beethoven and Schumann into the colorful, nationalistic atmosphere of Russia. But, ultimately it is the eloquence and technical mastery of his compositions that founded his lasting popularity. He was blessed with an extraordinary gift for melodic imagination, and learned to use it in contexts of structural integrity--not a given among the world’s great melodists.

The violin concerto was written in 1878 during a time of his growing success as a composer, after having lived in Moscow for slightly over a decade. During that time he had composed four of his six symphonies, his first piano concerto, and other important works. However, composition of the violin concerto is associated with one of the most controversial and unfortunate episodes in Tchaikovsky’s life--his ill-fated marriage with Antonina Ivanovna Milyukova. It was a hurried affair, with neither party’s motives exactly clear even today, after endless sifting of the evidence. It lasted only two months, but they never divorced. Thereafter, Tchaikovsky underwent a long-term re-orientation in his artistic output.

After returning from recuperation from the marriage in Switzerland, Tchaikovsky set to work on the concerto, collaborating with a young violinist, Iosif Kotek, who had been a student of his at the Moscow Conservatory. It was completed swiftly, but the première was delayed, owing to the difficulty of finding a violinist who was either willing--or able-- to perform it. It finally received its first public performance in Vienna in 1881. The ensuing review by the famous Viennese critic, Eduard Hanslick (you may remember his difficulties with Richard Wagner) has gone down in journalistic history. Among his comments were that in the work “the violin . . . is beaten black and blue;” that the finale has the “brutal and wretched jollity of a Russian holiday” with “savage vulgar faces . . . curses . . . and vodka.” “Tchaikovsky’s Violin Concerto gives us for the first time the hideous notion that there can be music that stinks in the ear.”

Well, today of course, we all know better. It is one of the most difficult of violin concertos, and Tchaikovsky’s inimitable melodic gift is omnipresent. It is a masterpiece, even though it never achieves the traditional balanced give and take expected between orchestra and soloist. Its effervescence, bravura, and appealing melodies have earned it a lasting place in the repertoire.

Symphony No. 6 in B Minor (“Pathétique”), opus 74 –Tchaikovsky

This symphony is Tchaikovsky’s last work—he died of cholera only nine days after its première—and it is universally hailed as one of his finest. It exhibits all of the characteristic passion and melodic beauty for which the composer justly is known, and is suffused with a dark and tragic essence. Tchaikovsky struggled all of his life with his identity, fears of social rejection, and frustrated relationships with others. By the end of his life these issues had surely come to head, and the composer freely spoke with his brother of the reflection of his suffering in this final, gripping composition. There is even a current musicological fight over whether or not he poisoned himself to end his life (under threat of social disgrace), or deliberately drank the unboiled glass of water during an epidemic. In any case, the circumstances of his life’s final struggles are manifest in this beautiful and tragic work. In the event, he had at first actually considered “Tragic” as a subtitle for the symphony, but his brother suggested the Russian for “pathos,” and the French equivalent, “pathétique,” is the evocative descriptor that we all know. But, be aware of inexact translations--there is nothing pathetic here.

The first movement is conventional in its form, but the mature composer exhibits a sense of tight construction, and weaves the movement with his characteristic contrast of exciting, dynamic motives and delicious lyrical melodies. The mood for the entire symphony is set at the very beginning by the brooding bassoon solo. The second movement is one of the most well known of his symphonic movements, cast as it is in five-four time, an absolutely innovative use of the metre in art music (is it not unknown in Russian folk music). The main theme and its manipulation is so smooth and adroit that it is altogether easy to forget the unusual time signature, and simply to experience the music as being some kind of waltz with a “limp.” And remember, no one excelled Tchaikovsky in the waltz. The third movement is an exciting and optimistic march, but the heavy brass and snappy rhythms notwithstanding, it doesn’t seem a military march at all. Rather, it is a march from the world of the ballet—the *Nutcracker* and *Sleeping Beauty* come to my mind. No Shostakovitchian Russian soldiers are goose stepping here! The final movement in many respects is the characteristic movement of the symphony. It is most unusual in that it ends softly—very softly. No Romantic symphony had ever ended that way—they end loud and with a bang—right? And great applause! But in this case the agony and beauty of this reflection of the composer’s life and experience terminates in a final expiration that is remarkable for its challenging softness. “This is the way the world ends/Not with a bang but a whimper.” Hold your breath . . . and then feel free to respond with as loud a reaction as you may wish.

--Wm. E. Runyan

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