Concert 2 October 23, 2010

Concerto in D Minor—Aram Khachaturian, arr. Jean-Pierre Rampal

Aram Khachaturian was the third member of the mighty triumvirate of Soviet composers—the others, of course, being Shostakovich and Prokofiev. Like the others, he too, enjoyed a long, hot and cold relationship with the Communist party and those who dictated the musical æsthetics of that troubled time. A native Armenian—born in Georgia like Stalin—he early on moved to Moscow to further his musical studies, but for the rest of his life infused his music with vivid stylistic influences from his Armenian heritage. His personal musical language is almost unmistakable, often characterized by melodies that are oriented to folk or popular elements, a remarkable rhythmic drive, and a masterful command of colorful orchestral writing.

American audiences have long known his ballets, *Spartacus* (1950-54) and *Gayane* (1942), the latter being the source of the immortal "Sabre Dance." While writing in the usual media of symphony, piano, and instrumental chamber works, he is well known for his many contributions to incidental music for plays, film scores, and even Soviet Army brass bands. His Concerto in D Minor (1940) was originally written for violin and orchestra (dedicated to the renowned Russian violinist David Oistrakh)—and is widely performed thus. Years later, the eminent French flautist, Jean-Pierre Rampal, came to Khachaturian and requested a flute concerto. For various reasons it did not materialize, but with the composer's blessing and encouragement, Rampal arranged the Concerto in D Minor for flute. The original cadenza, like all cadenzas, is completely idiomatic for the solo instrument, in that case the violin, so Rampal sensibly wrote his own cadenza to suite his virtuosity on the flute. Completed in 1967, Rampal's arrangement has become a respected addition to the concert repertoire, and is performed the world over.

The first movement opens with a big statement from the whole orchestra, and the solo flute gets right to work with a driving, almost frenetic theme that is catchy and rather dance-like. Khachaturian's signature, almost hypnotic rhythms and "punchy" accents, carry it all along. Some contrasting themes eventually come along that are more lyrical and somewhat pseudo-oriental to take us to the middle section, which is framed by cadenzas for the solo flute. The second cadenza is extensive (written by Rampal), and after a sedate beginning, is marked by exchanges with the solo clarinet. The music intensifies and a recap of the themes careens to the end. It is a long movement, but it certainly entertains.

The second movement opens with melancholy solos by the bassoon and the clarinet, aptly setting up a rather stark mood. Throughout the movement, the solo flute languorously evokes the exoticism that so often is characteristic of Armenian composers, and reminds us again that Khachaturian was not an ethnic Russian, but rather a Soviet citizen. A dramatic outburst provides contrast near middle of the movement, before the bleak atmosphere returns.

A big fanfare from the orchestra that would do 20th Century Fox justice clues us to what we are in store for in the finale. The main theme is not exactly sing-able, as the flute spews forth torrents of notes that sound at times like a virtuoso bebop improvisation. If you remember the composer's "Sabre Dance," the excitement generated is familiar. Along the way, we hear tunes from earlier in the concerto as we zip along in a veritable *moto perpetuo*. We are spurred ahead by another of Khachaturian's mannerisms: strong accents that temporarily confuse the meter. Are we in two or three? From time to time, there are rather lyrical, reflective episodes to rest our nerves, but the wild Mongolian pony ride resumes, and a cascade of notes from the flute ends this musical flamboyance.

Symphony No. 5 in E Minor, Op. 64—Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky

Tchaikovsky completed six symphonies during his lifetime, the last three of which have long been concert staples. The three, while exhibiting both the tangible and intangible characteristics of the composer that endear him to music lovers everywhere, are each unique expressions of his musicianship and personality. Symphony No. 4 (with good reason associated with "fate") came out of an especially troubled time in his life with regard to his ill-starred (and short) marriage—among other factors was his attempted suicide. Symphony No. 6 was, of course, his last one (he died of cholera nine days after its première), and its title bore the French equivalent of "pathos." Its tragic pianississimo ending truly evokes the finality of his great personal anguish. So, where does that leave us with No. 5?

In some ways, we find ourselves in a similar kettle of fish. The fifth symphony was composed and premièred in 1888, when the composer was 48 years old, and it too—based upon the composer's own testament—more or less is concerned with "fate." He was already in contemplation of death: many close friends had recently died, he was in poor mental and physical health, and had made out his will in contemplation of his demise. However, the preoccupation on fate in the fifth symphony is perhaps not the hammering fate of the fourth symphony, but rather a more acquiescing acceptance of what Tchaikovsky called "providence." The first movement starts right out with the so-called fate motive, played by both clarinets, ominously down in their lowest register; this motive will be easily heard in all four movements, and is a strongly unifying element in the composition. The movement proper begins with a dark march—with a characteristic Tchaikovskian stuttering syncopation—initiated by solo clarinet and bassoon, accompanied by pizzicato strings. The whole movement centers on this theme, but there are others, most notably a winsome waltz-like theme. Although the movement moves through a variety of intense, dramatic (read loud) utterances, it ends in soft darkness—just as it began.

The second movement is perhaps the most well known of the four movements, owing to its use in a pop arrangement by Glenn Miller and others, shortly before World War II—luckily time has faded most of that particular memory. The melody is primarily a solo for the principal horn, and a glorious, beautifully spun out affair it is. A related idea for solo violin follows shortly. The middle of the movement generates considerable interest from its vivid harmonic surprises, a new theme in the clarinet, and general sense of unrest and instability. Then, the so-called fate motto from the first movement interrupts, and we are back at a return to the lovely first theme, although with changed orchestration and a dramatic buildup of emotion before quietly subsiding.

There are those who opine that no one equaled Tchaikovsky in waltzes—even the Strauss's—and I concur. The third movement is a series of incredibly elegant waltzes that make you wish that we all still danced them. The middle of the movement provides some relief from the waltzes in the form of a short scherzo in duple meter, contrasting nicely with all the ONE-two-three of the waltz. It is a frenetic affair, not so much unlike the suggestion of little rodents scampering around when they should be gracefully waltzing. The scampering continues for a while when the waltzes return, signaling the end of the movement—but not before the low clarinets menacingly interrupt for a moment with the motto that opens the whole symphony, and which we will hear in spades imminently in the last movement.

A sure-fire spiritual narrative in art during the romantic period—or any period, for that matter—is the journey from darkness to light, from defeat to victory, and perhaps death to transfiguration. Beethoven, Brahms, and other great composers wrote any number of works with this theme, and it is Tchaikovsky's and ours in this symphony. The long introduction to the last movement is based upon the motto theme of fate, but now opens in E major, the happy key of redemption. Nevertheless, victory cannot be won so easily, and the main movement returns to E minor to begin the battle. Tchaikovsky works it out with a dramatic review of familiar materials, as we gradually find our way into the world of light. The victory is hammered out in the motto of fate by stentorian unison brasses, and a tumultuous gallop to the end wraps up the triumph.

--Wm. E. Runyan

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