Cheyenne Symphony Orchestra

Masterpiece 1 – Mesmerizing Melodies **October 19, 2024**

Piano Concerto No. 2 in C minor, op. 18—Sergei Rachmaninoff

Those who create art, whether in the performing arts or in the visual arts, inevitably find their personal "niche" in matters of style. And it is of little consequence whether or not their artistic orientation is a conscious personal choice, or one seemingly imposed by their audiences and by professional critics. Simply put, there are artists whose voice naturally is to work within tradition and commonly-understood artistic language; they strive to develop that tradition to new levels of meaning through their own talent and personal vision. Others make a total commitment to artistic truth arrived at through new voices, new styles, new languages. Every museum and gallery of art, and every concert hall is testimony to this essential dichotomy. And it must be admitted, that there a universal prejudice among intellectuals—especially those who subconsciously view the arts as they do technology—that the new is necessary the good. The latest styles are more sophisticated, hence more relevant, and old styles should be left with the dead artists that created them. This popular view was dominant among the cognoscenti during most of the twentieth century, but is beginning to moderate, as a more liberal acceptance of diverse artistic styles now is more common than previously—in all the arts.

Like J.S. Bach, who upon his death was looked upon as more or less an old fuddy-duddy (now we know better, of course), Rachmaninoff has borne his share of criticism for having composed in a hopelessly old-fashioned style, long after its relevance. His compositions are the last major representatives of vivid Russian Romanticism—long after that style was presumed dead and buried. Yet, like Bach, his musical genius, his talent, and his strong belief in the validity of his art all led him to create a legacy that took "old-fashioned-style" to a natural and valid high point of achievement. While a child of the nineteenth century, he died almost at the midpoint of the twentieth, secure in his success, and secure in the world's enduring appreciation of his "dated" style.

Rachmaninoff wrote four piano concertos, the first was a student composition (later revised) from 1896 and the last was composed in 1926 (revised in 1941). The second is by far the most popular, and was finished in 1901, when the composer was twenty-eight years old, and had just undergone a devastating series of professional setbacks that cast him into deep depression. It contains all of the essential characteristics of Rachmaninoff's style that have established his lasting place in audiences' esteem everywhere. An unparalleled melodic sweep, the lyricism of which seems to unfold in growing cascades of sound, is coupled with masterful orchestration of rich, lush textures. The composer was a virtuoso pianist and his writing for the solo piano emanates from a mastery of the almost limitless figurations possible for the instrument. Although Rachmaninoff left Russia after the Revolution, never to return, and lived in a variety of places—at his death in 1943, he was living in Beverly Hills—he lived as a Russian all of

his life. That is, he and his wife maintained a home with Russian servants, spoke Russian there, and lived with Russian customs.

That ethnicity speaks eloquently in almost every bar of his music, and anyone can sense that from the first ominous chords that build the tension before the entrance of the main theme in the second concerto. The darkness of the mood is enhanced by the simple choice of register for that theme, for it is scored for unison low strings and clarinet, right at the bottom of the violins' range. The winsome second theme, in a happier mode, is pure Rachmaninoff. The middle of the movement is suitably restless, in a varied tapestry of themes, keys, and textures, leading to a climax, where we expect the usual review of the opening. But, the composer, ever creative, turns things upside down, and we hear quite a different closing section than is usual. New ideas and relationships add considerably to the charm of the movement, as it builds to the inevitable climax at the end.

The slow movement finds the piano ruminating with figurations that leads one to ask: "Where is the theme?" The flute provides the answer, in a delicate solo that leads to a series of exchanges between the solo piano and other instruments in a languorous atmosphere that is now thought of as a trademark of the composer. Even if you don't have perfect pitch, there is an indefinable satisfaction gotten from the unexpected choice of key for this movement, a rather unusual relationship between E major and C minor.

The last movement, of course, is the one with the melody made so famous during the 1940s in a maudlin pop arrangement. For all of that, to the present, this concerto continues to be a source of musical elements ripped from it and used in unexpected contexts. In any case, after a few gestures in the lower instruments, the soloist kicks the movement off with a grand cadenza that teases us as to where the movement could possibly go. The answer is a dynamic march of a theme, snapping along. The "big, lyrical theme" is the contrast, introduced by the warm, rich viola section. Exciting give and take between the two ideas propels the movement along, until the "big, lyrical theme" wins the day, and soars rhapsodically to the majestic ending that only a grouch would denigrate. The years in Rachmaninoff's life immediately before the composition of this work may have been low ones for the young man, but this concerto is apt testimony to the palliative effects of a good therapist and marrying your sweetheart.

Symphony No. 2 in C minor, op. 17, "Ukrainian"—Pyotr Ulyich Tchaikovsky

The symphonies of Tchaikovsky clearly stand in the center of nineteenth-century orchestral repertoire. Beloved by audiences and musicians alike for more than a century, they were embraced enthusiastically from the onset. To be sure, there was a time when some commonly scoffed at what they perceived as the composer's emotional theatrics and shallow playing to the cheap seats. Thankfully, that reaction has largely passed, and Tchaikovsky's genius stands in higher regard. To be sure, the deep affection for his symphonies largely stems from the evergreen popularity of the last three of his six works in that genre. Of his other symphonic works, *Romeo and Juliet* (a rather early piece) enjoys equal esteem with the three last symphonies.

Nevertheless, his first three symphonies are a delight, and decidedly feature the overall style, attractive melodies, and dramatic flair with which audiences are familiar in the "big three" final ones. And don't for a minute presume that the first three are mere

"juvenilia" or youthful experiments. Tchaikovsky matured quickly in the St. Petersburg conservatory, under the tutelage of Anton Rubinstein, and he dove into symphonic composition with alacrity and facility. While a student he made several youthful efforts at symphonic music, but the major steps came when he moved to Moscow in 1866 as a young teacher of harmony. His first symphony appeared that year (but typically, underwent revisions in 1874). The remarkably mature overture, *Romeo and Juliet*, came soon, in 1869—it too, underwent revisions right up to 1880. The second symphony was completed in 1872, and revised in 1880. It was composed during the summer and fall while the composer was a guest with his sister's family in Kamianka, a city about two hundred miles southeast of Kyiv. The estate and the area were favorites of Tchaikovsky, and there he learned the Ukrainian folksongs that so inform the second symphony.

A word about the popular nickname for the symphony: Almost since its composition it has been known as the "Little Russian," not given by Tchaikovsky, but by the music critic, Nikolay Kashkin. For centuries that term has been fraught with controversy, owing to its origin as a Russian reference to the Ukraine. To be sure, the composer wrote his second symphony while visiting in Ukraine and it significantly employs Ukrainian folksongs. Nevertheless, "Little Russia" as a reference to the Ukraine is a term that now is in totally disrepute—even considered a major insult by Ukrainians. Rather like *The Moldau* by Smetana. The river in the Czech Republic is the Vltava, and "Moldau" is a forgotten vestige of German hegemony. Likewise, by general agreement, the symphony is now "Ukrainian." Time moves on.

While Tchaikovsky was instilled with a deep appreciation of Russian culture and native musical traditions, in keeping with the general tendencies of nineteenth-century musical nationalism, he was not one who generally used folk materials in his *oeuvre.* The "Ukrainian" symphony is the chief exception, for he utilized traditional Ukrainian folksongs in three of its four movements. No mean feat, for it is often a technical challenge for composers to utilize the characteristic shapes of folk tunes into the material suitable for development in Western art music. Unlike much of his music, the symphony is largely devoid of dark emotional angst. Rather, it is a bustling, cheerful work that churns happily along.

The first movement begins with a substantial *andante* introduction, featuring the folksong, "Down by Mother Volga"—it will be heard again in the middle of the movement. A solo, unaccompanied French horn leads off with the tune, soon answered by the bassoon. The composer goes on build on elements of the tune, with the tension increasing by the addition of his characteristic, rather frenetic, string scales. But shortly, the introduction concludes with unaccompanied horns playing the tune as at the beginning.

The tempo quickens considerably, and a new, snappy tune appears. Some will identify it as used in Rimsky-Korsakov's *Russian Easter Overture.* In the best tradition of a Beethovenian "economy of means," Tchaikovsky takes elements of both melodies as motifs—including a little three-note ascending one--and constructs almost the entire weft of the movement. Not until the development section in the middle, though, do we finally hear the opening horn melody again—this time in the two clarinets. Every idea seems familiar and integrated into the whole, as it all charges through the recapitulation to the end in the best careening, pounding Tchaikovsky fashion. But ending softly, as it began, with "Down by Mother Voga" in the horn and bassoon.

The "slow" movement is in fact a rather stately little march introduced and led along quietly by the timpani. It's not a folksong, but a recycled and rather sedate bridal procession from his unpublished—and largely lost--opera, *Undine* (1869). The quiet little tune seems a bit odd for a wedding march, but after ambling along in several settings, it gives over to a contrasting middle section. This is, indeed, another Ukrainian folksong. Its simple rhythm soon is accompanied by Tchaikovsky's characteristic rhythmic undulations, carrying it along to the return of the "wedding march." And it, through the composer's mastery of drama through orchestration and imaginative rhythms, returns in new imaginative guises. Many will be reminded of sounds, colors, and textures from his *Nutcracker* from decades later in his life—demonstrating his remarkable early musical maturity. Finally, the modest little march gradually fragments softly away, ending, as it began, with the timpani.

The scherzo that follows doesn't last long, and is an effervescent, sparkling affair, almost a *moto perpetuo*. The strings bounce fervently along, driven by sizzling woodwind interjections—a Tchaikovsky trademark, for sure. Another familiar mark of the composer is here, as well: the implication of a 3/4 measure for two in 6/8 time—perceived as a syncopation. The middle section starts with a miniature "village band" in the woodwinds, and is in duple time, providing an agreeable contrast with the usual triple time of most scherzos. After a few times through the tune, the opening rapidity of the beginning returns. A short coda concludes the romp.

A massive, magisterial passage introduces the *finale.* It has long been compared with Mussorgsky's grand, imposing "Great Gate of Kiev" (composed two years later and orchestrated even later, actually), but this brief introduction is quintessentially Tchaikovsky's. The movement proper is soon quietly, but vigorously, off to the races, starting with the Ukrainian folksong, "The Crane." The composer is reputed to have said that he was taught the tune by an old servant on the estate where he was staying when he wrote the symphony, and that the old butler was the "real composer." The tune serves admirably in its role as the main material of the movement. It's really only four bars long, and simple as can be. It pervades the movement almost as thoroughly as the immortal four notes of the first movement of Beethoven's fifth symphony. One can do almost anything with a simple, well-chiseled tune as this, and Tchaikovsky manifestly does. You're going to hear it a lot! After running the tune through several guises, a descending, more lyrical theme comes softly in the strings—and those two themes make up the whole from here on. In this, and much more, the young Tchaikovsky shows himself to have been an astute student of the disciplined approach to composition that stems from Haydn and Mozart through Beethoven—Russian nationalism and folk materials, notwithstanding.

After a vigorous development of both ideas, the approaching recap is signaled by the traditional a long held note in the bass. A riot of chromatic harmony rises over the bass and the ominously thundering timpani, but suddenly ceases. Unaccompanied horns announce the recapitulation, which begins softly with the lyrical second theme, joined soon by "The Crane" theme in the string section. But Tchaikovsky's famous knack for stupendous finishes soon dominates all. Then abruptly, in a surprise, everything halts dramatically, with a smash in the tam-tam. The frenetic coda then takes off in a breathtaking dash to the slam-bang ending—driven by the pervading, demonic timpani.

It’s all great fun, and highly entertaining. Experienced listeners will spot much that resembles the composer’s evergreen fourth symphony, and it’s clear that the young Tchaikovsky already had developed his personal mastery of the symphonic idiom. To be sure, there are moments that seem overwrought, or prolix, and a bit repetitious, but it’s a fine work, and a welcome revelation for Tchaikovsky fans for whom it is new.

--Wm. E. Runyan