

PROGRAM NOTES by Dr. William Runyan

“Pictures at an Exhibition”

CSO Masterpiece Concert #1, September 19, 2015

Festive Overture—Dmitri Shostakovich

Shostakovich is clearly regarded as one of the small group of the twentieth century's most significant composers. Yet, on no other of his peers has more ink been spilt attempting to understand what thought processes and motivations reveal a composer's own true self than that on Shostakovich. Was he a musically gifted, but incredibly naïve, tool of the worst instincts of Stalinism--or, a wondrously deceptive, resident critic of the terrors of Soviet Communism? Shostakovich left a maddeningly ambiguous record of his inner thoughts. He certainly was capable of writing the most satirical compositions that scathingly excoriated the excesses and flaws of Western Democracies. But his informing contribution was his music of dark and profound passion that laments the fundamental tragedies of universal human experience. It is tempting for those who enjoy easy freedoms of artistic expression to hold others from other times to a higher moral standard and to adjure them not to “sell out” their integrity. But few major composers have endured such political and artistic oppression as that of Shostakovich.

He was a student during the early years of the Soviet regime, and like all artists in that country at that time, enjoyed the relative indifference towards the arts of early communism. Stylistic prescriptions and proscriptions lay in the future, so he studied the music of a broad array of traditional and modern composers. His musical education was broad, and he was free to pursue his own artistic interests. He was generally supportive of the communist regime, and saw no reason to think otherwise. But, as the world knows, during the late twenties and early thirties, life in the Soviet Union evolved into something much more sinister and challenging. As Stalin gradually clamped down on every aspect of everyday life, the arts became progressively a tool for social and political indoctrination. Art was impressed into the service of the state as propaganda, taking in this case the form of what is known as “Socialist Realism.” By 1936, Shostakovich had fallen into dangerous disfavor with his controversial, lurid, opera, *Lady Macbeth of the Mtsensk District*—a work that definitely did not glorify the joys of the collectivist state. But, he gradually redeemed himself by treading an artistic tightrope between shallow, disingenuous Soviet musical propaganda, on the one hand, and serious works in the Western tradition of art music that exposed him to the wrath of the government guardians of received ideology.

This intellectual high-wire act fostered a lifetime of masterpieces: symphonies, string quartets, keyboard works, and more. His historical reputation is founded upon a musical style informed by master craftsmanship, seriousness, and depth of feeling--not so unlike a previous master of classical musical style, Johannes Brahms. So, in this context, it is a marvelous, pleasant surprise to encounter the effervescent ebullience of his triumphant *Festive Overture*.

Like Brahms' genial, happy, *Academic Festival Overture*, Shostakovich's overture is equal evidence of the lighter side of a serious, introspective artist. And, like

Brahms' work, Shostakovich's overture was commissioned for a specific, festive occasion—in this case, a concert by the Bolshoi Theater Orchestra, celebrating the anniversary of the October 1917 Revolution. Apparently, the conductor had not prepared adequately for the occasion, and he found himself in the unenviable position of not having a suitable opening, celebratory work. The concert (6 November 1954) was only three days away when Vasili Nebol'sin, the conductor, made a visit to the composer—probably with his hat in his hand. To his surprise, Shostakovich agreed to compose a suitable opener on the fly. He had a reputation for fast work, and this occasion demanded it. Working like a Mozart, sending pages still wet with ink to the copyists at the theater, Shostakovich knocked out a masterpiece in record time.

After opening with a dramatic, imposing fanfare in the brass, the tempo changes to breakneck speed, with a main theme of cascading notes. It's literally a driving gallop, carrying the sparkling ocean of notes before it. A lyrical second theme soon appears in the solo horn, but still driven ahead. Soon, a Tchaikovskian *pizzicato* section leads us back to the main theme. Both themes are then combined, followed by a recap of the brilliant fanfare and a mad dash to the end. Whence this *tour de force* of frenetic optimism from one of the century's most *serioso* composers? Well, all great artists are capable of infinite varieties of expression. But, perhaps there was something in the piece of relief at the recent death of the century's greatest criminal, and Shostakovich's personal nemesis, Josef Stalin. Shostakovich was innately subtle and ambiguous in his artistic expression. So are the joyful implications of *Festive Overture*.

Piano Concerto No. 1 in Bb Minor, op. 23— Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky

Most probably, no composer other than Beethoven has enjoyed the popularity in this country of that of 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 those imposed upon his personality and personal life after his death. A welter of factors has been trotted out to “explain” his art and its personal genesis: his sexuality, politics, religious beliefs, and social class. Every generation of musicologists--radical and otherwise--social commentators, and political ideologues has taken its shots at the man. And, chief among the negative attitudes 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 underlies 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.

Tchaikovsky's first piano concerto is a relatively early work, composed when he was about thirty-four years old. While other significant composers have achieved greater recognition at an earlier age, Tchaikovsky had enjoyed only modest success by this time. After graduation from the St. Petersburg Conservatory, he was hired by the great Russian

pianist, Nikolai Rubinstein, as a teacher at the Moscow Conservatory, and was composing in his spare time. It must be admitted that his heart was not really into teaching, understandably preferring to devote himself to composition—which he had pursued avidly for some time. He had achieved a modicum of success with his second symphony and the evergreen *Romeo and Juliet* concert overture. But that is all. In 1874 a piano concerto seemed to him to be a promising step forward. By the end of the year he was ready to share his new piano concerto with his colleagues at the conservatory. That first run-through has entered the lore of musical disasters. The eminent Rubenstein tore into the concerto with a scurrilous and heartless diatribe of invective and condemnation that has become legendary. “Vulgar,” “worthless,” “unplayable,” and “bad” were just the beginning of the verbal assault. Tchaikovsky ignored this tirade, and simply went to a more amenable pianist, Hans von Bülow, a distinguished pianist and conductor, whose reaction was essentially the opposite of that of Rubenstein. Von Bülow was delighted with the concerto and added it to his 1875 tour of the United States, giving its world première in Boston that fall. It was a smash hit--Von Bülow programmed it over one hundred times during the tour, and its success was secure.

The four memorable, opening unison horn notes of the first movement herald the beloved—almost impossibly romantic--theme, played by the strings, and accompanied by the stentorian sweeping chords in the piano. It's a terrific beginning, but a rather odd and completely unconventional beginning for a typical piano concerto of the time, or any other time, for that matter. For as great as it is, it's not even the main theme! Moreover, after the pianist engages in a short solo excursion, the theme gloriously returns, but afterwards is never heard again—that's it! Talk about a bait and switch. A quiet transition takes us to the actual main theme, one that Tchaikovsky famously recounted that he had heard sung by a blind beggar at a fair. This jerky little theme is bandied about a bit by the woodwinds and soloist before the second theme appears, an elegiac, wistful tune in the solo clarinet, followed by a final, rather meditative idea in the violins. These ideas are the subject of the rest of an impressive, energetic movement in which the composer efficiently works through his materials, often combining the main themes. A rather long and sensitive piano cadenza near the end captures the poignancy and emotion of the whole affair, and a driving conclusion features the little tune that closed the opening, first heard in the violins.

Slow movements of major concertos during the nineteenth century often featured deep, meditative explorations of the more profound moods of art—Beethoven's come to mind. But here, Tchaikovsky has crafted a peaceful and light contrast to the dynamic sweep and power of the first movement. Accompanied by *pizzicato* strings, the solo flute introduces the bucolic main theme, followed by variations of figuration and orchestral color, all contributing to a decidedly rustic, pleasant atmosphere. The middle section is a mad dash of sparkling scamper—the experienced listener may be struck by a suggestion of the finale to the *Nutcracker*. The composer's affinity and skill at writing dance music is second to none, but in this case he had adapted a French popular song as his basis. After the excitement, the dreamy opening material soon returns to wrap up this radiant and cheerful diversion.

Tchaikovsky took inspiration from Russian folksongs in the earlier movements of this concerto, and the vigorous main theme of the last movement is based on one from the Ukraine. Its syncopated accents and repeated rhythms serve well this dancing last

movement. Soon, a contrasting theme, broad and lyrical, provides an ingratiating contrast, and the two main ideas alternate with suitable variation as the conclusion looms. The jerky, ethnic opening tune is soon eclipsed by the grand romantic tune—set up with a dramatic solo piano introduction. Both the orchestra and the soloist sing out the big melody, in the familiar way for which our composer is justly famed. A breathtaking *prestissimo* careens to the end and seals it all.

The question, of course, is what was Rubenstein thinking when he excoriated what is perhaps the most popular piano concerto of all time? That's not to be known, of course, but he went on to eat a substantial meal of crow, and became one of the work's most dedicated exponents.

***Pictures at an Exhibition*—Modest Mussorgsky-Ravel**

A staple of piano recitals given by virtuosi, this work is probably more familiar to many in its orchestration by Ravel. Unquestionably, a *tour de force* for the solo pianist, it is equally a sound spectacular for the modern orchestra. It lends itself admirably to reinterpretation in the orchestral idiom for the simple reason that few works in the repertoire consist of such deliberate and vivid depictions of a variety of colorful images from the physical realm. It was composed by Mussorgsky in 1874 during three weeks in June as a tribute to the distinguished Russian architect and artist, Viktor Hartmann, who had unexpectedly died of an aneurysm the age of only 39. Hartmann, a Volga German, was one of the champions of a new resurgence of indigenous Russian art, along with his close friend Mussorgsky. In recognition of Hartmann's work, an exhibition of some 400 of his drawings and paintings was given in the Academy of Fine Arts in St. Petersburg in February and March of 1874. Mussorgsky's musical tribute to his friend takes the form of a suite of movements that vividly depict the subjects of ten of the paintings (few of the art works survive).

Pictures at an Exhibition is so replete with such a variety of colorful, eccentric and unique visual references that it almost begged for a setting for orchestra, with that group's magnificent palette of sound "colors." Yet, in all fairness it must be said that it is unquestionably equally successful as a solo piano work—imagine one person drawing all of the color, drama and power out of one instrument! To my mind, a comparison between the original piano version and its orchestration is rather like imagining a Western vista photographed in black and white by Ansel Adams on the one hand, and the same vista painted on a grand scale by Alfred Bierstadt. Both would be equally stunning interpretations. In any case, Mussorgsky's work was almost immediately seized upon by orchestrators and literally dozens of orchestral interpretations have been pumped out during the past 135 years—many by distinguished familiar conductors, composers, and orchestrators. Some of these occasionally are performed today, but only one has achieved almost universal acclaim and which dominates today's concert performances, and that is the one done by Maurice Ravel in 1922. His gift for orchestration is well familiar to audiences, and his choices in the orchestration have now well nigh defined the work in the world's imagination.

In keeping with the composer's desire to mimic as much as possible the experience of a visitor to the exhibit, he starts the series of vignettes with a short movement (*Promenade*) that literally depicts the viewer walking from painting to painting. The music of this short introduction appears several times throughout the suite in various guises as the visitor moves from picture to picture. The effect of walking is cleverly created by music that is without a

steady metre—Mussorgsky self-deprecatingly said that it alluded to his own rather lumbering gait.

The suite begins with the *Promenade*, played by solo, unaccompanied trumpet. It doesn't last long, and we arrive at the first picture, *Gnomus*, the music for which stutters to and fro, depicting a grotesque little gnome. The promenade takes us to the next picture, *Il vecchio castello* (the old castle), a serene and antique scene in front of which a troubadour sings. In this case, Ravel has given the troubadour's song to a smoothly lyrical saxophone. The promenade next takes us to the Tuileries, the famous garden near the Louvre, where children are noisy (and contentiously) at play. This short scene features light woodwinds and lyrical strings in a consciously naïve and playful style. Without the help of the promenade, we encounter the next movement, *Bydlo*, dominated by a rustic, lurching Polish oxcart, depicted so famously by the melancholy tuba solo. The movement starts softly, growing louder as the huge cart goes by, and fades as it passes on. Again, the promenade theme presents us with the next picture, a truly bizarre painting of dancing "un-hatched chicks in their shells." Chirping flutes, *pizzicato* strings, and a scampering bassoon aptly conjure up frenetic baby birds in a mad avian ballet.

Immediately thereafter, there emerges a dark portrait of two Russian Jews, Samuel Goldenberg and Schmuyle—one rich, one poor. This clichéd and dated caricature uses a Middle Eastern gapped scale to evoke the two men's culture, beginning with Goldenberg, followed by a rapidly tongued, muted piccolo trumpet passage for Schmuyle. The two portraits are then combined, followed by a short, morose tag. The famous market at Limoges comes next, populated by quarrelsome French peasant women. Barking horns and scintillating strings and woodwinds seem to evoke village gossip as it makes the rounds. A sudden pause, and then a breakneck coda leads us to the dark and moribund world of the Roman catacombs, subtitled "With the dead, in a dead language."

Massive low brass and French horn passages ominously begin the first section, later joined by the trumpets in a powerful evocation of the finality of death. The second section is somewhat less foreboding, with strings and woodwinds creating a somewhat reflective search for the meaning of it all. The next movement takes the concept of "bizarre" to a truly higher level: it pictures the famous Slavic witch, Baba Yaga, who eats small children and lives in a hut standing on chicken legs. This particular hut is in the shape of a clock whose bells can be heard. It's a grotesque exercise in frenetic chasing around, far exceeding what we have heard so far. The end winds up in a whirlwind that spins right into the finale of the whole suite, the "Great Gate of Kiev." The majestic theme is worked through in several versions—some with intimations of a carillon. Each version seems to be more intense than the one before, with teasing sections of calmness, only to be redoubled by even more massive and imposing renditions that seem to challenge human and musical limitations. The peroration is usually considered to be just about the loudest and most imposing playing of which an orchestra is capable.

--Wm. E. Runyan