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In the Steppes of Central Asia—Alexander Borodin

Successful composers who are also distinguished medical school faculty members, as well as research chemists with over 40 respected publications are rare, to say the least. Yet, that was Borodin, holding doctorates in both fields. Born an illegitimate serf, he nevertheless was fortunate to have a loving father (a member of the nobility), who took major steps to legitimize him, educate him, and situate him in the higher ranks of Russian society. From his earliest years he pursued equally avid interests in music and science. Many of his youthful musical compositions survive, he learned to play the violoncello well, and, with friends, studied, composed, and performed music with gusto. He entered medical school, discovered an interest in research chemistry, and spent a career in both endeavors. Typically, on trips to Europe he found time both to visit laboratories of well-known chemists, and to show his musical scores to Franz Liszt—an admirer of his work.

Although he composed songs, piano works, chamber works, and symphonies, he is best remembered today for his unfinished opera, *Prince Igor* (many will think of the famous “Polovtsian Dances” from that work) and, of course, *In the Steppes of Central Asia*. Truth be told, he would probably be surprised that the latter work is almost his signature composition for today’s audiences, for it is a modest one. He expended far greater effort on *Prince Igor*, his very respected symphony in B minor, and his many chamber works—for him, personally, they defined his career’s successes.

In the Steppes of Central Asia is a brief work intended to accompany a tableau (one of twelve, each with its own illustrative music by various Russian composers). These twelve *tableaux vivants* were intended as a part of a general celebration in 1880 of the first twenty-five years of the reign of Czar Aleksandr II. After an assassination attempt (not uncommon in those days) the whole affair was canned, but Borodin’s contribution was premièred later in the year in another circumstance. One of the putative virtues of the Czar was his expansion of the Russian Empire (sound familiar?) to the East, and the scene that Borodin was assigned was a rough illustration of that.

The pictorial content of the music is clear, for Borodin included the following description in his score:

“In the silence of the monotonous steppes of Central Asia is heard the unfamiliar sound of a peaceful Russian song. From the distance we hear the approach of horses and camels and the bizarre and melancholy notes of an oriental melody. A caravan approaches, escorted by Russian soldiers, and continues safely on its way through the immense desert. It disappears slowly. The notes of the Russian and Asiatic melodies join in a common harmony, which dies away as the caravan disappears in the distance.”

This romantic little piece consists of only three clear musical elements: a melody that evokes a Russian folksong, another one—a very different one—that is intended to be in an “Eastern” style, and constant pizzicato octaves in the strings that depict the animals of the

caravan plodding along. Solos from the clarinet and horn with the Russian tune open the work, and shortly, the pizzicato strings evoke the caravan, followed by the exotic sound of the English horn with the “Oriental” tune. Gradually, the Russian tune is treated to fuller and louder orchestration as the caravan happily moves along, obviously content and secure under the aegis of the “protection” of the expanding Russian empire. The string section returns with a full treatment of the Eastern tune, and then all three elements are cleverly combined contrapuntally as we reach the climax. Gradually there is a musical fade out as apparently the caravan disappears into the distance, and we are left only with the solo flute playing the Russian tune.

Violin Concerto in A Minor, op. 82—Alexander Glazunov

A man of prodigious musical talents, Glazunov’s long career as a composer, performer, teacher, and music administrator spanned a period of profound evolutionary musical changes. As a young man he was a pupil of Rimsky-Korsakov at the St. Petersburg Conservatory around 1880, ultimately succeeding him as director, but he lived well into the nineteen thirties, long after Stravinsky, Shostakovich, Prokofiev, Schoenberg, *et al*, had led the world into modernism. There has always seemed to be an innate tendency for pundits in the arts to denigrate as *passé* the work of those geniuses who—despite achievement and contributions of the highest order—have the misfortune to live on into changed times. It is true of J.S. Bach, Sergei Rachmaninoff, and Louis Armstrong, and it is equally true of Alexander Glazunov.

His musical style is fundamentally romantic, tonal, and well grounded in the best of nineteenth-century compositional procedures. Within that context his musical language is warm, but emotionally restrained, and not at all prone to many of the well-known excesses of late romanticism. His mastery of the orchestra is complete, and reflects the colorful orchestration of his mentor, Rimsky-Korsakov. Glazunov is a careful craftsman, and workman like in every regard, but there are some notable quirks in his style that seem to be hallmarks of most of his works. Rather than laying out a clear theme, and then working it out—familiar to, and expected by most audiences—he has a tendency for rapid shifts of color, dynamics, harmony, and even melodic motifs. So there ensues an architecture that often seems rhapsodic. The other signal trait is a notable penchant for striking—almost confusing—innovations in formal structure.

Of his many works, the large instrumental ensemble compositions include eight completed symphonies, two piano concertos, the popular saxophone concerto (1934) from late in his life, and the violin concerto. Other than the saxophone concerto, many think that his best work was done about the time he assumed the leadership of the St. Petersburg Conservatory in 1905, and that includes, of course, the important violin concerto.

Composed in 1904, the violin concerto was given its première by the famed Leopold Auer, professor at the St. Petersburg Conservatory, and one of the most well-known violin pedagogues of all time. While the concerto has all of the familiar movements of a standard concerto, one is challenged to pick them out. For one, they are performed without a break, seamlessly. But, even more confusing for many is the composer’s famous predisposition for ingenious novelty in choosing what to occur when! Basically, the slow movement in this concerto, rather than occurring normally as a separate second movement, in this case is blended right into the middle of the first movement, and it’s not exactly easy to spot exactly when that happens—remember, it all flows “seamlessly” from the very beginning to the end. So, one will hear the beginning of the “first movement,” wherein the fundamental themes occur, but before the usual working out of this material, Glazunov takes a time out, and segues right into brand-

new material that serves as a “slow movement.” It is just as lyrical as the first section, so some will find it a bit tricky to spot the inception. When finished with the contrasting movement, Glazunov then takes up the development of the opening material, recaps it, and ends this part with the traditional cadenza. This one is a particularly difficult one—aren’t they all? However, this one is notorious for its fiendishly challenging double stops. Upon its conclusion the work then moves on to the last movement without pause. That is easy to follow, for the trumpets announce the dynamic, active last movement with a martial fanfare, which the solo violin answers and repeats, and we’re off to the races to the end in a most vivacious manner.

It’s clear why, despite its eccentricities of form, relatively brief length, and somewhat ambiguous musical syntax, Glazunov’s work has remained a major work in the repertoire, and a favorite with audiences everywhere for over a century. Its beauty, lyricism, virtuosity, and romantic appeal put to rest to any arguments over being out of step with the modernism of Glazunov’s younger contemporaries.

Symphony No. 4 in F Minor, op. 36—Piotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky

Tchaikovsky completed six symphonies, of which the last three are concert staples. The fourth is a product of a particularly tumultuous time in his life, centering around his relationship with two women. They are the wife from his short, disastrous marriage, and his patroness—whom he never personally met. He began composition of the symphony in 1877, shortly after he had been “adopted” by Nadezhda von Meck, the wealthy widow of an engineer. Von Meck had begun generous financial support of Tchaikovsky, and perhaps, more importantly, had entered into a long, personal relationship via correspondence that lasted more than a decade. They exchanged at least two letters a week in a relationship that probed philosophic and artistic matters. While remote and superficially formal, this affiliation obviously served deep emotional needs of Tchaikovsky. They may have encountered each other on the street, but never spoke face to face. He agreed in the summer of 1877 to dedicate the symphony to her, his “best friend.”

At this point, his life took a turn that most now agree can only be characterized as bizarre, if not perverse. In short—the facts still provoke controversial interpretations—he abruptly married Antonina Milyukova, a woman he hardly knew, proposing marriage only a few days after having met her. Tchaikovsky’s diffidence was well articulated in a letter to von Meck: “[I have] lived thirty-seven years with an innate aversion to marriage . . . in a day or two my marriage will take place . . . What will happen after that I do not know.” Work on the symphony stopped, understandably, while this precipitous relationship rocketed to its dénouement. The loveless marriage was doomed from the beginning, complicated by Tchaikovsky’s homosexuality—the attendant psychological motivations will never completely be understood. The next couple of months were hell, he tried to commit suicide by wading up to his waist in the Moscow river, hoping for pneumonia; ultimately he fled the country. Distance from Antonina obviously worked its charms, for he finished the symphony by January of 1878. He dedicated the work to von Meck, and a well-known letter to her tells us much about what the composition meant to him.

While Tchaikovsky was averse—like most of the musical intelligentsia—to imbuing a symphony with extra-musical “stories” and meaning, after the composition’s completion he complied with a request of hers to tell her what the work was about. He wrote at length,

somewhat emotionally and with no small hyperbole, but the gist of his response is instructive. Fate is the subject and focus of this symphony:

The introduction is the seed of the whole symphony, undoubtedly the main idea. This is fate, that fatal force which prevents the impulse to happiness from attaining its goal, which jealously ensures that peace and happiness shall not be complete and unclouded, which hangs over your head like the sword of Damocles, and unwaveringly, constantly poisons the soul.

Thus, the first movement opens with a powerful unison from the horn section followed by the rest of the brass announcing the “fate” motive; it returns at each division of this sonata form to remind us. The first theme is in the string section, cast in a waltz rhythm; Tchaikovsky’s ballets are eloquent testimony to his mastery of that dance. The second main theme is announced by the solo clarinet, offering some hope, but is dashed by the recurring motive of fate. The movement ends in emotional depths. The second movement is a lyrical reminiscence that Tchaikovsky called “. . . feeling that enwraps one when he sits alone at night in the house exhausted by work . . . It is sad, yet sweet to lose one’s self in the past.” The scherzo that follows is a testament to the composer’s reputation for skill in orchestration. The strings play pizzicato all the way through, opening the movement by themselves. The middle section begins with woodwinds alone, playing a kind of little village band tune. The brass, staccato, follow with their contribution, with the movement ending somewhat as it began, again with pizzicato strings. The famous finale begins with a raucous, virtuoso rip followed by the main theme, a Russian folksong called “In the Field a Little Birch Tree Stood.” The words to the song allude to marriage, women, solitary existence, and the divergent fates of those who marry—or do not. The fate motive from the first movement intrudes upon the festivities yet one more time, but is swept away by the exuberance of the coda. Tchaikovsky’s words inform: “Rejoice in the happiness of others—and you can still live.”