

Peoria Symphony Orchestra Program Notes
November 19, 2016
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This all-Russian program opens with the bubbly overture to Glinka's fairytale opera *Ruslan and Ludmilla*. Cellist Richard Hirschl then joins the Peoria Symphony Orchestra for Shostakovich's *Cello Concerto No. 1*, a tribute to his friendship with cellist Mstislav Rostropovich...and a subtle posthumous poke in the eye to Josef Stalin! Closing this "Russian Masters" program is Tchaikovsky's fourth symphony, with its thundering "Fate" motive.

Mikhail Glinka (1804-1857)
Overture to *Ruslan and Ludmilla*

Glinka's opera Ruslan and Ludmilla was completed in 1842, and was first performed on December 9, 1842 at the Bolshoi Theater in St. Petersburg.

Glinka, widely viewed as the founding father of Russian musical nationalism, is largely known today through two operas. The first of these, *A Life for the Czar* (1836), was a success both for its incorporation of elements from Russian folk music, and its contemporary plot, which resonated with burgeoning Russian political nationalism. For his second opera, Glinka turned to an epic poem by Pushkin. Pushkin's *Ruslan and Ludmilla* had secured his reputation when it was published in 1818, and it was widely known in Russian literary circles. The poem is a fairy-tale recreation of ancient Slavic epics: in this case, an extremely complex version of the "sleeping beauty" legend. Glinka had originally planned to work with the poet in creating a libretto, but Pushkin died in a duel before he could collaborate on the opera. Glinka brought in a team of no less than five librettists, who turned Pushkin's already convoluted story line into an even more complex series of tableaux. The confusing plot probably contributed to a rather lukewarm response at the premiere performance. *Ruslan and Ludmilla* soon caught on, however, and became a recognized symbol of Russian music: the opera was performed over 300 times in St. Petersburg alone over the next half century, and was widely heard in other Russian cities. European and American audiences were a bit slower to accept the work (it was not performed in the US until 1942), but it is still heard occasionally today.

Though the opera *Ruslan and Ludmilla* is a rarity on today's stages, its brilliant little overture has become a staple of the orchestral repertoire. The overture is set in Classical sonata form. The opening melodies, accompanied by some absolutely furious violin lines, are borrowed from the opera's final victory scene. The contrasting theme, played by violas, cellos, and bassoons is borrowed from a battlefield aria sung by the hero Ruslan in the second act. Near the end, the trombones - as usual, relegated to the role of Bad Guy - play a descending whole-tone scale associated with the evil dwarf Chernomor, but this is soon drowned out in general rejoicing.

Dmitri Shostakovich (1906-1975)

Concerto No.1 for Cello and Orchestra, Op.107

This work was composed in the summer of 1959, and Mstislav Rostropovich was the soloist at the premiere in Leningrad on October 4, 1959.

Shostakovich and his older colleague Sergei Prokofiev - the two most prominent composers of the Soviet Union - maintained a not-always-friendly rivalry for years after Prokofiev's return to Russia in 1936. While their personal and professional relationship was sometimes testy, they consistently admired one another's music. Shostakovich's first cello concerto is a case in point: his inspiration was Prokofiev's 1952 *Symphony-Concerto*. Shostakovich later claimed that he had played his record of the Prokofiev work so many times that there no music left on it, just a hiss! The other inspiration for the concerto came from Shostakovich's friendship with the preeminent Russian cellist, Mstislav Rostropovich. In the years following Stalin's death in 1953, Soviet artists were increasingly free to travel in the West, and Rostropovich began to tour extensively. He very much wanted a concerto from his friend to play on concert tours, but on the advice of Shostakovich's wife Nina, he was careful never to mention this to the composer.

Shostakovich was well aware, however, that "Slava" (Rostropovich's nickname among friends) wanted a solo work, and in 1959 he announced that "My next work will be a *Cello Concerto*. The first movement, an *allegretto* in the style of a jocular march, is already complete. There will probably be three movements in all. I would find it difficult to say anything concrete about its content: such questions, despite their apparent naturalness and simplicity, always cause me problems. After all, it often happens that in the course of writing a work the form, the means of expression and even the genre can change substantially. I can only say that this concerto was first conceived quite a long time ago." The score was finished in July, and Shostakovich mailed the score to Rostropovich, who memorized the solo part in just four days, in time to play it for the composer. Rostropovich played the first performance in Leningrad, on October 4, 1959, and continues to perform it until retirement in 2006. Shostakovich's second concerto, written in 1966, was also composed for Rostropovich.

By the time he completed it, the concerto had expanded to four movements. Though Shostakovich referred to the opening movement (*Allegretto*) as a "jocular march," the mood is dark and sarcastic throughout. The opening motive stated by the solo cello is quickly developed with short supporting outbursts from the woodwinds. The solo horn plays a strong supporting role, and near the end, the horn takes over with a new theme as the cello plays a furious accompaniment. A rude blow from the timpani ends the brief recapitulation.

The final three movements are linked. Nothing could be further from the acerbic mood of the opening movement than the lyrical and melancholy *Moderato*. The movement opens with a quiet passage for strings, and the horn is again given a solo role. It continues as a dialogue between the cello and voices from the orchestra - clarinet, basses, and finally the entire string section. The mood becomes more agitated, until

another timpani blow announces a rather spooky closing episode, which has the solo part playing high harmonics to the accompaniment of the celeste. The third movement is an extended solo cadenza that allows the soloist expressive room to develop ideas from the previous two movements. At the end, an increasingly edgy mood ushers in the orchestra for the finale.

The last movement (*Allegro con moto*) returns to the mood of the first, but here there is an even wilder character. The opening theme begins with a melodic quotation of the Georgian folk song *Suliko* - Stalin's favorite tune - so cunningly disguised that the composer had to point it out to Rostropovich. *Suliko* was also one of the main themes of a satirical cantata *Antiformalist Rayok*, where it characterizes the "Little Father of the People" - a thinly-veiled caricature of Stalin. *Rayok*, composed between 1948 and 1968, was never performed during Shostakovich's lifetime. (In fact, its very existence remained a secret until 1989, when glasnost policies finally made it safe to perform this work openly.) The appearance of this tune in the cello concerto clearly had the same intent: a posthumous dig at Stalin. The mood is frenzied throughout, as the concerto ends with a set of virtuoso fireworks for the soloist.

Peter Ilyich Tchaikovsky, (1840-1893) **Symphony No.4 in F minor, Op.36**

Tchaikovsky's fourth symphony was composed between May 1877 and January 1878. The first performance took place in Moscow on February 22, 1878.

Even during the most disastrous times in his personal life, Tchaikovsky was capable of profound musical creation. In the spring of 1877, when he was hard at work on sketches for his fourth symphony and doing preliminary work on his opera *Eugene Onegin*, he received an increasingly passionate series of love letters from Antonina Milyukova, a conservatory student. When she finally threatened to commit suicide if he refused to meet her, Tchaikovsky visited her, but firmly refused her proposals of marriage. Within a few weeks, however, he relented, and they were married in July. Just why Tchaikovsky - rarely a completely balanced individual in his own right - impetuously agreed to this marriage remains something of a mystery. He may have wanted to silence nasty whisperings about his homosexuality. He had in fact, announced to his family in the fall of 1876 that he intended to "fight my nature with all of my strength" and marry as soon as possible. Whatever the reason, this marriage was an unmitigated disaster for both of them. Within a few days of the wedding, Tchaikovsky found Antonina's presence unbearable, and he fled Moscow to Kamenka, making excuses about needing seclusion to compose. His teaching position forced Tchaikovsky to return to Moscow in September, and he promptly attempted suicide. Failing suicide, he left again, now to St. Petersburg, where doctors recommended a permanent separation from his wife and a change of scenery. He fled to the small Swiss town of Clarens in October, and stayed away from Russia for nearly six months. Though he made trips to Paris, Florence, and Vienna during this period, he found Clarens a congenial place to work. He finished three large works there during the early months of 1878: completing the *Symphony No.4* on

January 6, *Eugene Onegin* just a month later, and in a final burst of creative energy, composing the *Violin Concerto* during a 26-day period in March and April.

At the very time he was going through his tragic marriage with Antonina, Tchaikovsky was forging a much longer-lasting and in many ways more significant relationship with another woman, Nadezdha von Meck. Madame von Meck was an enormously wealthy widow who became attracted to Tchaikovsky's music and began to write to him in 1877. Tchaikovsky eagerly seized upon this relationship, and for the next fourteen years they carried on a deeply personal correspondence, each sharing their most innermost thoughts with the other. They purposely never met one another in person - it is reported that they did run into one another by chance on at least two occasions, but never spoke. (Though this may seem to have been a curious and barren relationship, is it really so far from countless semi-anonymous romances conducted by email and texts in our own time?) The benefits to Tchaikovsky were boundless: here was a woman who was not even remotely interested in a conventional marriage or physical relationship, but who nonetheless wanted to share his intellectual and emotional life. Beyond the emotional support he craved, Madame von Meck also became his patron, granting him an annual salary that allowed him freedom from teaching duties to compose. This passionate long-distance relationship continued until 1891, when it was broken off, apparently at her insistence.

The *Symphony No.4* is perhaps the greatest work of this calamitous period, and its success did much to restore Tchaikovsky's confidence. The work is a masterpiece in purely musical terms, but the composer himself invited a much more personal interpretation. In explaining the work to Madame von Meck, he wrote: "I should be sorry if symphonies that mean nothing should flow from my pen, consisting only of a progression of harmonies, rhythms and modulations. Most assuredly, my symphony has a program, but one that cannot be expressed in words; the very attempt would be ludicrous...shouldn't a symphony reveal those wordless urges that hide in the heart, asking earnestly for expression?" Nevertheless, Tchaikovsky continued his letter with a long and detailed description of the program. Although he never mentions the disastrous marriage in this letter - she was, after all, intimate with the details, and had given him financial support throughout the episode - his narration is painfully autobiographical.

The opening movement (*Andante sostenuto*) begins with a massive statement by the brass and woodwinds. In his narration, Tchaikovsky described this theme as "...Fate, the inevitable force which halts our aspirations towards happiness." If the opening theme is angry and powerful, the cantabile second theme is more resigned. "The feeling of despondency and despair grows ever stronger and more passionate. Isn't it better to turn from reality and lose ourselves in dreams?" As an answer to Tchaikovsky's plea, there is a dreamlike interlude of happiness and relaxation, marked by a lilting oboe solo. This dream is of course rudely shattered by Fate, with a mighty recapitulation of the opening material.

The second movement, marked “*Andantino* in the manner of a song,” presents a lovely but dejected melody in a very free set of variations. Tchaikovsky describes the movement as “another phase of suffering.” As narrator, he sits alone late at night, recalling happy and sad scenes from his youth. “How sad, yet sweet, to lose ourselves in memories of the past.” The melody stated in the opening by the oboe, returns in undecorated form at the very end, played in darker tones by the bassoon.

The outer sections of the scherzo (*Allegro vivace*) are dominated by light pizzicato playing by the strings. Here, Tchaikovsky describes the music as “fleeting arabesques” coming into the mind of a man who has drunk just a little bit too much wine before falling into a troubled sleep. There is a central episode, lightly played by woodwinds and brass; the narrator’s brief memory of a drunken peasant singing with a distant military band.

The famous opening passage of the finale (*Allegro con fuoco*) provides a technical display for the strings and woodwinds, but it also represents the narrator’s observations of the festive and rather frenzied happiness of those around him. Darker moods intrude, in the guise of a minor-key Russian folk melody played by the woodwinds, but these are always overcome by exuberance. The movement’s climax comes with a restatement of the “Fate” theme from the first movement. Even this forbidding theme is conquered by the festive opening melody, and the symphony closes with a brilliant coda. In Tchaikovsky’s words, “Rejoice in the happiness of others, and life will still be possible.”

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