



Program 1 Notes

October 2 & 4, 2011

by Jon Kochavi

We begin our 2011-12 season with four inspiring works from the great Russian Romantic composer Piotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky. Although the latest of these (the *1812 Overture*) was completed while Tchaikovsky was just 40, the four pieces sample broadly from the composer's styles. We will hear music meant to evoke particular places, events, and literary dramas as well as music built upon a more abstract musical form. Tchaikovsky draws from folk and military music of Italy, France, Russia, and Ukraine in these works, weaving a colorful sonic tapestry. The chronological period of the music follows Tchaikovsky through his initial professional successes, his deepest personal crisis, and the beginnings of his renewed confidence that fueled his creative spirit during the final 15 years of his life.

Capriccio Italien, Op. 45 (1880)

After his doomed marriage failed disastrously in 1878 (culminating in a somewhat half-hearted suicide attempt), Tchaikovsky embarked on a prolonged period of travel to clear his mind and hopefully re-inspire him creatively. It worked wonders. In short order, he had composed his monumental Fourth Symphony, his opera Eugene Onegin, and his Violin Concerto. After spending a large part of 1879 in Paris, Tchaikovsky moved on to Italy reluctantly, only after he had been completely worn down by his brother Modest's persistent entreaties. He was pleasantly surprised when he arrived in Rome in December, finding inspiration in both the art and the street life of the city. By early February, Tchaikovsky wrote,



**Piotr Ilyich
Tchaikovsky**
(1840 – 1893)

I am working on a sketch of an 'Italian Fantasia' based on folk songs. Thanks to the charming themes, some of which I've heard on the streets and others from song compilations, the work will be effective.

The work would become his *Capriccio Italien*, a simple and direct burst of joy from a composer doing what he could to forget his dark troubles.

Tchaikovsky weaves five Italian tunes into his vibrant work. The opening trumpet fanfare is based on the bugle call of the Royal Cuirassiers that Tchaikovsky was subjected to every morning from an army barracks next to his hotel in Rome. This is followed up by a slow-moving dance in the strings that moves right into a lighthearted oboe tune that depicts a stroll down the street on a festival day. After a proud and bold string melody and a return to the opening dance, the piece finishes with a jumpy *tarantella* that is whipped into a frenzied romp.

Piano Concerto No. 1 in B-flat minor, Op. 23 (1874)

Allegro non troppo e molto maesto
Andantino semplice
Allegro con fuoco

Tchaikovsky's concerto is a cornerstone in the literature and an audience favorite today, but the piece's first audience, which consisted of a single member—friend and exceptional pianist Nicholas Rubinstein—was hardly enchanted by the work. Tchaikovsky had decided to dedicate the concerto to Rubinstein, and sought out his opinion on the work as soon as it was completed in December, 1874. Not being a pianist himself, Tchaikovsky had hoped that Rubinstein could make a few technical suggestions for the piano part. On Christmas Eve 1874, Tchaikovsky played through the concerto for Rubinstein. The composer wrote of the awkward encounter:

I played through the first movement. Not one word was said – absolute silence. You know

how foolish you feel, if you invite one to partake of a meal provided by your own hands, and the friend eats and remains silent. 'At least say something, scold me good-naturedly, but for God's sake speak!' Rubinstein said nothing . . . I kept my temper and played the concerto through. Again silence. 'Well?' I said, standing up. Then a torrent burst forth from Rubinstein's mouth. He spoke quietly at first; then he waxed hot, and at last he resembled Zeus hurling thunderbolts. It appeared that my concerto was utterly worthless, absolutely unplayable; passages were so commonplace . . . bad, trivial vulgar; only two or three pages were good for anything . . . An impartial bystander would necessarily have believed that I was a stupid, ignorant, conceited note-scratcher who was so impudent as to show his scribble to a celebrated man.

Tchaikovsky rescinded his dedication.

German conductor and pianist Hans von Bülow was the beneficiary of Rubinstein's tirade. Von Bülow, happy to receive the dedication, praised the concerto to the hilt, calling it "original, noble, powerful, and mature." He took the piece to Boston for its premiere on October 25, 1875, where audiences immediately embraced it. At each of the premiere performances in Boston and New York, encores of the finale were demanded and granted. Critics were somewhat befuddled; one declared the piece an "extremely difficult, strange, wild, ultra-modern Russian concerto." But the furious brilliance, lush orchestration, and sweeping Romantic lyricism eventually won over even Rubinstein, who grew to love the work and play it regularly.

The concerto opens with one of the most spectacular passages in all of Western music. The majestic horn introduction heralds an expansive Romantic melody that washes over the orchestra in relentless waves accompanied by the famous piano chords that range over 6+ octaves of the keyboard. Much has been made of how this extraordinary introductory material disappears after the first few minutes of piece, never

to return. However, it is not so unusual for the introduction of a sonata form to give way completely to the main thrust of the movement. Tchaikovsky is playing with proportion in this movement: his introduction is remarkably substantial, but his first theme—a somewhat frenetic skipping melody based on a Ukrainian beggar tune—fades away almost before it has a chance to start. Tremendous lines rise upwards again and again in the movement, often with monumental crescendos, dramatically building anticipation. The piano part is rife with frequent solo interludes that include virtuosic passagework, and the free-ranging, improvisatory cadenza is a *tour-de-force*.

The stormy first movement is balanced by the subdued lyricism of the second. The outer sections present a Romantic vision of a pastoral setting. With a pared down orchestra featuring gentle flute and cello solos, the scope is more narrow and more personal. The middle section is an unexpected *prestissimo* based on a French song "*Il faut s'amuser, danser et rire*" ("You must have fun, dancing and laughing").

Dramatic kineticism returns with a bang (literally) in the finale. Relentless rhythms with heavy accents on off beats propel this raucous dance based on a Ukrainian folksong which eventually spins into a *cantabile* melody. Organized loosely as a rondo (ABACA), the movement uses a perpetual motion gesture in the piano to introduce the climactic crescendo, ushering in the triumphant return of the cantabile melody and culminating in a spectacular coda.

Romeo and Juliet, Fantasy Overture (1869)

In May 1869, composer and mentor Mily Balakirev casually suggested writing an orchestral piece based on Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* to Tchaikovsky during a walk. In the fall, Tchaikovsky started work on the overture, but found himself spinning his wheels, writing to Balakirev, "I'm completely played out, and not one even mildly tolerable musical idea comes into my head." Balakirev responded immediately with characteristic bluntness: "I received your letter and I'm distressed that so far you've achieved

nothing.” He went on to explain in detail how he wrote his own overture to *King Lear* and even included a sketch of what he thought Tchaikovsky write for the opening four measures! Prompt (and unsolicited) follow-up letters from Balakirev, suggested a dramatic narrative, a key scheme, and the basic musical structure for the piece. By November 9, Tchaikovsky, with his mentor’s help, had regained his creative powers. He wrote to Balakirev:

My overture is progressing quite rapidly. . . . A large portion of what you advised me to do has been carried out as you instructed. In the first place, the scheme is yours: the introduction depicting [Friar Laurence], the struggle (allegro), and love (second subject). Secondly, the modulations are yours.

By the end of the month, the overture was complete, dedicated to Balakirev. Tchaikovsky was reluctant to send Balakirev the full score at first, but did send him quotes of the main themes, which the elder composer found inadequate in various ways. Some of Balakirev’s criticisms resonated with Tchaikovsky’s own misgivings, and the composer re-wrote most of the introduction the following year, after the premiere, and then tinkered with it again ten years later. Regardless of these fits and starts, it was a stunning achievement for the young composer, and is generally considered his first masterpiece.

The extended introduction opens with a Russian chorale for clarinets and bassoons, conjuring Shakespeare’s Friar Laurence character, and moves on to evoke both youthful optimism and foreboding tragedy. Tchaikovsky marvelously stretches this introduction to build up tension that finally bursts out with the fierce Montague and Capulet feuding theme, replete with percussive clashes of swords. The famous “love theme” (which Tchaikovsky also used for his 1869 song “None But the Lonely Heart”) emerges first in the English horn and is lushly restated in the strings. These themes are developed, combined, and re-combined, culminating in the violent conclusion. The coda is a requiem, with the love

theme rising upwards. According to Tchaikovsky scholar David Brown, the final *forte* chords “harshly recall that fatal feud on which these young lives have been broken . . . , and [suggest] a stunned horror at what has been done.”

Overture 1812, Op. 49 (1880)

We cap off our grand opening concert with Tchaikovsky’s ultimate celebratory overture. The piece was actually written to celebrate the opening of Moscow’s Cathedral of Christ the Savior, itself built to commemorate the Russian victory over the French in 1812. In September 1812, what seemed like a vastly superior French army faced the Russians led by General Mikhail Kutuzov in the bloody Battle of Borodino, west of Moscow. Over the course of the single day of the battle, about a third of the 250,000 troops on either side were killed or wounded. Although the Russians ended the day in retreat, they had broken the spirit of Napoleon’s men, who marched into Moscow to find the city torched the ground by the Kutuzov’s army. Within a month, the decimated, malnourished, and freezing French army was forced to begin long, difficult retreat out of Russia, and the Russian Empire was restored.

Tchaikovsky’s famed overture paints a rousing picture of the Battle and the eventual Russian victory. The opening Largo for two violas and four cellos is the Russian hymn “God Preserve Thy People”, and Tchaikovsky scatters references to Russian folk tunes throughout. The depiction of the military confrontation is thrilling and tense, with off-beat accents and scampering 16th-notes to recreate the chaos of the battlefield. The strains of *La Marseillaise* are soon drowned out by canon fire, and a long series of downward spiralling, gradually slowing figures represent Napoleon’s retreat. The triumphant final section brings back the hymn, now surrounded by the Russian national anthem “God Save the Czar” and victorious canon fire and pealing bells. 🕒

Guest Artist

Pianist **Orion Weiss** is one of the most sought-after soloists and collaborators in his generation of young American musicians. His deeply felt and exceptionally crafted performances go far beyond his technical mastery and have won him acclaim from audiences, critics and colleagues in a wide range of repertoire and formats.



Orion Weiss,
piano

In 2010, he was named the Classical Recording Foundation's Young Artist of the Year, released a recital album of Dvorak, Prokofiev and Bartok, was featured in a recording project of the complete Gershwin works for piano and orchestra with the Buffalo Philharmonic and

JoAnn Falletta, and performed with other orchestras including the Baltimore Symphony Orchestra, Toronto Symphony Orchestra, and Slovenian Philharmonic.

The summer of 2010 saw well-received returns to the Ravinia, Bard, La Jolla, Seattle, Colorado, and Bravo! Vail Valley music festivals and Chamber Music Northwest.

In recent seasons, Mr. Weiss has performed with many renowned symphonies including Los Angeles Philharmonic, San Francisco, Chicago, Philadelphia, Pittsburgh, New World, National Arts Centre Orchestra, Orpheus Chamber Orchestra — and in duo summer concerts with the New York Philharmonic at both Lincoln Center and the Bravo! Vail Valley Festival.

As a recitalist and chamber musician, Orion has appeared at many venues and festivals. He won the 2005 Juilliard William Petschek Award, made his New York recital debut at Alice Tully Hall that April and his European debut in recital at the Musée du Louvre in Paris.

Mr. Weiss's impressive list of awards includes the Gilmore Young Artist Award, an Avery Fisher Career Grant, the Gina Bachauer Scholarship at the Juilliard School and the Mieczyslaw Munz Scholarship. He attended the Cleveland Institute of Music. 🎹

In His Words . . .

***D**uring the season I can involve both the really focused part of my brain preparing for a concert and the really experimental part of my brain trying new things for whatever's coming next. I listen to recordings. I play it on different pianos. I come back with different intentions and ideas. Performing is a really good way to grow with music. When I perform for people I listen in a new way. I transport myself into the ears of an audience member. I see what's working and what isn't, and I do instantaneous changes to make it work. When I'm playing with other musicians I'm reacting to what they're doing. Musicians always play it a little bit different than the last time. Music is like a conversation. You wouldn't respond exactly the same way. You might change your inflection. Even in a solo concert, there's still a dialogue going on inside the music. There are characters and voices. In the Tchaikovsky concerto there's this endless stream of different characters with attitudes and personalities. You can imagine a person. We're trying to tell a story. Even if it's not a story with a plot, it's still a story that makes emotional sense. 🎹*