

OPENING NIGHT SPECTACULAR PROGRAM

Piotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky (1840-1893): Polonaise from *Eugene Onegin*

Although Tchaikovsky began a career in law, he quickly turned to music, but he was never content. In fact, he once described his existence as “regretting the past, hoping for the future, without ever being satisfied with the present.” As a teenager Tchaikovsky suffered a severe emotional blow when his mother died, and he struggled throughout his life to come to terms with his homosexuality. He tried marriage, but the union lasted only three weeks and further deepened his bouts of depression and guilt. In 1876 he was introduced to Nadezhda von Meck, a wealthy widow and patron of the arts. Through her financial help, the Russian resigned his teaching post and began devoting himself full-time to conducting and composing.

The term polonaise usually describes a stately Polish dance in slow or moderate tempo. However, the opening and closing sections of Tchaikovsky’s Polonaise are rather exuberant, even boisterous. The middle part provides contrast with a smaller number of players and different thematic material. Tchaikovsky originally wrote this work as dance music for a grand party scene in his opera *Eugene Onegin*, but tonight it is performed as an independent concert piece.

Variations on a Rococo Theme for Cello and Orchestra, Op. 33

Tchaikovsky adored Mozart, often referring to him as “the Christ of music,” and the older master was probably the source of inspiration for the Variations. Despite the title, Tchaikovsky did not borrow the theme from the Rococo Period (a musical style from around 1730-1760). Instead, he created a work that

exhibits certain Rococo characteristics. For example, orchestral scoring is much like that of Mozart’s day, with pairs of each of the four basic woodwind instruments, two horns, and the usual strings. Thematic material and variation treatment are also similar to mid-18th century practice. The melody, initially presented in four-measure phrases, is simple but elegant, and each of the variations offers different rhythmic figurations and tempo changes. Tchaikovsky composed the work for cellist Wilhelm Fitzenhagen, a colleague at the Moscow Conservatory. After performing Tchaikovsky’s original version at the premiere, Fitzenhagen made changes to the work, cutting the last of Tchaikovsky’s eight variations, and re-ordering the remaining seven, necessitating some other small cuts and changes. Tchaikovsky’s original version remained unknown until it was revived in 1941; the Fitzenhagen version, which you will hear tonight, had become a standard work in the repertoire by that time, and is still popular with cellists today.

Although the overall effect is one of restraint and poise, Tchaikovsky’s work is, of course, Romantic. The variations are often extended and not limited to phrases of equal length, and two of them are emotional Russian laments. Chromaticism abounds in woodwind interludes between phrases of the theme. This piece is charming for the listeners but deceptively difficult for the soloist. Except for the 5th variation, which entrusts the melody to the flute, the cello is featured in all the variations, either as a solo with numerous virtuosic runs, trills, and cadenzas, or in imitation with the orchestra. With no orchestral tuttis, the cello plays almost continuously throughout the entire composition, often in the high register in the thumb position.

OPENING NIGHT PROGRAM *(continued)*

Symphony No. 5 in E minor, Op. 64

After finishing his Fourth Symphony, Tchaikovsky did not approach the symphony genre again until 10 years later. By that time he began to worry that his creative energies might be exhausted: "I am dreadfully anxious to prove not only to others, but to myself, that I am not played out as a composer." During the summer of 1888 he complained that "The beginning [of Symphony No. 5] was difficult," but by the end of August he had finished the work and commented: "It seems to me that I have not blundered, that it has turned out well."

Tchaikovsky was a great admirer of Beethoven, and his Symphony No. 5 resembles Beethoven's Fifth. Both works begin in a minor key and conclude triumphantly in the parallel major mode. Like Beethoven, Tchaikovsky uses a "fate" motif that appears in all the movements, thus unifying the entire composition. While we know Beethoven's "fate" was his impending deafness, Tchaikovsky's dilemma is not clear. In reference to his symphony, he mentions "complete resignation before fate...doubts... reproaches against xxx." Though no one knows for sure what "xxx" represented, most scholars consider this a reference to his homosexuality, which was not widely known at that time.

The structure of Symphony No. 5 is traditional. The two outer movements are in sonata form, the second one is in ABA format, and the third is a waltz-like minuet with a lively trio.

Tchaikovsky is best loved and remembered for his beautiful melodies, most of them lengthy and not easily dissected. One of these, the opening theme in the first movement, binds the entire composition together by recurring numerous times in varied forms. A remarkable harmonic turn is found at the beginning of the

second movement, where quiet sustained chords in B minor move smoothly to a lyrical melody in D Major in the horn. This emotional, heart-touching theme has served as fodder for all types of compositions and occasions, ranging from ballets to movies, TV ads, and even other classical works. One especially memorable example occurs in the musical *Maytime*, which appeared in a 1937 movie version, starring Nelson Eddy and Jeanette MacDonald. In the finale, the opening melodies from the first movement return triple forte and in extremely fast tempo, imparting a sense of momentum that propels the music forward to an exciting conclusion. According to the scholar Donald Tovey, the frenzied conclusion produces a feeling of "wishing to run faster and faster but not moving from one spot." Other more pessimistic scholars view the rush toward the end as a "failure of mankind to stand up to the power of fate—a failure which can only be postponed for a short time by means of struggle and resistance."

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