Program Notes

by April L. Racana

13 Mar | 15 Mar | 21 Mar

Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky (1840-1893)
Slavonic March in B-flat minor, op. 31

Originally titled "Serbo-Russian March on Slavonic Folk Themes", this work was written by the composer for a charity benefit in 1876 to aid and support soldiers who were fighting in the Serbian-Turkish War. The work had been commissioned by the Russian Music Society and was composed in less than a week. Tchaikovsky expressed his feelings in a letter regarding his homeland's involvement in the war to support the Serbians: "It is terrifying yet also gratifying that our beloved country is deciding at last to give confirmation of her worth."

It was in this atmosphere that the composer ultimately chose to incorporate several Serbian folk songs as well as the Russian national anthem to set the tone for the benefit concert of the Slavonic Charitable Society. The first section uses the tunes from two Serbian folk songs. Opening at the composer's direction 'with the movement of a funeral march', the first four measures act as an introduction with the lower strings and timpani setting the funereal pace. The folk tune "The Sun Does Not Shine Brightly" then makes its first appearance, continuing for most of the first part of the march, before a more upbeat middle section incorporates a few more folk tunes: "The Kind Serb's Doorstep" and "Their Guns Do Not Make Him Afraid" (also sometimes referred to as "The Serb is Happy to Go to War").

"God Save the Tsar" is first heard in this central section, only briefly, before the opening section is recapped much more strongly and dramatically, layering additional folk song material throughout. Eventually the full Russian national anthem brings the work to a climax and triumphant ending.

Nikolai Rubinstein, founder of the Moscow Conservatory (where the composer also taught), conducted the premiere in November of 1876, which apparently served its purpose, Tchaikovsky commenting that the work generated "a whole storm of patriotic enthusiasm." One critic stated that "the rumpus and roar that broke out in the hall beggars description. The whole audience rose to its feet, many jumped up onto their seats: cries of 'bravo' and 'hurrah' were mingled together. The march had to be repeated, after which the same storm broke out afresh. …It was one of the most stirring moments of 1876. Many in the hall were weeping."

Work composed: 1876 **World premiere:** 1876, Moscow
Instrumentation: 2 piccolos, 2 flutes, 2 oboes, 2 clarinets, 2 bassoons, 4 horns, 2 cornets, 2 trumpets, 3 trombones, tuba, timpani, percussion (snare drum, bass drum, cymbals, tam-tam), strings

Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky (1840-1893)
Violin Concerto in D Major, op. 35

This violin concerto has been said to be that of a Cinderella score, the performer for whom it was written subsequently refusing to play it, and when played eventually, it was received with less than a warm welcome. Tchaikovsky was inspired to compose this piece after being snowed in with violinist Joseph Kotek, while at a villa on Lake Geneva in 1878. After playing numerous sonatas and concertos together, Tchaikovsky decided to create a concerto for violin, with Kotek apparently playing through the work as it was being composed.

Surprisingly, it was not Kotek for whom this piece was dedicated, but Leopold Auer, a leading Russian violinist of the time. However, Auer, after

determining that the piece was not playable even convinced Kotek to cancel a scheduled performance of it as well. Consequently, this work was not heard in a public performance for three more years, where in 1881, Eduard Hanslick, a critic of the time stated that the violin was 'beaten black and blue' and that the finale left a 'stink in the air'.

The first movement opens gently with the string section, before the full orchestra joins in and leads into the soloist's first presentation of the main theme. Later the orchestra takes up the theme with the brass section in full fanfare before the soloist returns to elaborately decorate the melody. This is followed by another *tutti* section, which leads into the first extended cadenza by the soloist, one that only seems to tentatively want to finish as the flute enters with the theme and perhaps gently eases the soloist back to the recapitulation. One can almost imagine Kotek and Tchaikovsky exploring the many possibilities as the piece was being created all those years ago.

The original second movement did not meet with Kotek's approval, so Tchaikovsky replaced it with the current 'Canzonetta', indicating that the violin be muted throughout, although many soloists modify this direction or disregard it all together. The movement opens with soft winds before the soloist introduces the first theme. This wind ensemble returns at the close of the movement before leading directly into an almost surprise entrance of the final movement complete with another extravagant cadenza and more acrobatics on the featured instrument. The oboe melody, heard in the middle section, is said to be an autobiographical gesture of remembrance to the composer's wife, as it plays reminiscences of Tatyana's *panikhida* rhythm as heard in the opera, *Onegin*. And indeed the violin seems to sigh in soulful longing of previous times, before leading away to the almost frantic closing sections and uplifting coda.

Work composed: 1878 **World premiere:** 1879, New York
Instrumentation: 2 flutes, 2 oboes, 2 clarinets, 2 bassoons, 4 horns, 2 trumpets, timpani, strings, solo violin

Aram Khachaturian (1903-1978)
Adagio of Spartacus and Phrygia from the ballet 'Spartacus'
Symphony No. 3 – "Symphony-Poem"

Khachaturian was the son of an Armenian bookbinder who lived in the Georgian region of the former Soviet Union. In 1921, he went off to Moscow to enter college, but at the time music was only a side interest, studying cello privately. Eventually his musical skills would develop to the point where he entered the Moscow Conservatory in 1926, studying composition and remaining there until completing his graduate studies in 1936, (the same year he debuted his Piano Concerto), quickly becoming a rising star among composers of the region.

Spartacus was the last of Khachaturian's three ballets, and was premiered in December of 1956, in the city of Leningrad. Initially suggested by Nikolai Volkov as a possible story for a ballet in 1938, the composer did not begin work on the piece until the summer of 1950, writing on the first page of the score his feelings, "beginning with a feeling of great excitement." The composition would not be completed until February of 1954 and following its premiere two years later, the ballet was staged again in 1958 at the Moscow Bolshoi, the musical score and composer winning the Lenin Prize later that year.

Khachaturian had toured around the regions of Italy where the story of *Spartacus* was based historically, but determined that it would not be possible to try to replicate the music of that time stating: "We know nothing of the music of ancient Rome." Instead he incorporated the musical style for which he was well known from his previous works commenting: "I wanted the score to express clearly the drama of the plot," going on to explain that he felt the ideals were relevant to the times:

> "I believe that the theme of Spartacus and the slave uprising in ancient Rome has great importance and appeal today. I thought of *Spartacus*

> as a monumental fresco describing the mighty avalanche of the antique rebellion of the slaves on behalf of human rights…. The era of Spartacus was an important one in the history of mankind. Today, when most of the world's oppressed people are waging an intense struggle for national liberation and independence, the immortal image of Spartacus has acquired particular significance. When I composed the score of the ballet and tried to capture the atmosphere of ancient Rome in order to bring to life the images of the remote past, I never ceased to feel the spiritual affinity of Spartacus to our own time."

Khachaturian began compiling several suites of music from the ballet between 1955-1957. The second suite includes the work being presented for this concert series, the *Adagio of Spartacus and Phrygia*, aptly expressing the passion and depth of emotions when the two are reunited following the uprising and her rescue from slavery.

Symphony No. 3 was subtitled 'Symphony-Poem' and composed in 1947 as one single movement for the 30th anniversary of the Revolution. In the composer's own words and presumably as a tribute to communism he stated: "I wanted to write the kind of composition in which the public would feel my unwritten program without an announcement. I wanted this work to express the Soviet people's joy and pride in their great and mighty country."

Unfortunately, Khachaturian did not include this written dedication, so his intentions were misconstrued by the secretary of the Communist Party's Central Committee, Andrei Zhdanov, who delivered a decree in 1948 condemning not only Khachaturian, but also Shostakovich and Prokofiev, among other Soviet composers, describing them as 'formalist' and 'anti-popular'. All of the composers were coerced into making public apologies, which had a tremendous impact on them. Khachaturian himself reflected: "Those were tragic days for me… I was clouted on the head so unjustly. My repenting speech at the First Congress was insincere. I was crushed, destroyed. I seriously considered changing professions."

This Third Symphony premiered in Leningrad on December 13th, 1947 with Yevgeny Mravinsky conducting the Leningrad Philharmonic. The same conductor presented the work in Moscow later that same month. The work features an additional fifteen trumpets (on top of the regularly orchestrated brass already part of the main ensemble), as well as a flourishing organ solo and an expanded woodwind section. The middle section of the work incorporates a melody that is similar to the main theme from the *Adagio* in the *Spartacus* ballet.

As one of his compatriots, Dmitri Kabalevsky, aptly summed up: "The especially attractive features of Khachaturian's music are in its roots in national folk fountainheads. The captivating rhythmic diversity of dances of the peoples of Transcaucasia and the inspired improvisations of the *ashugs* (Armenia's native bards), -- such are the sources from which have sprung the composer's creative endeavors. From the interlocking of these two principles there grew Khachaturian's symphonism – vivid and dynamic, with keen contrasts, now enchanting in their mellow lyricism, now stirring in their tension and drama."

Adagio of Spartacus and Phrygia from the ballet 'Spartacus'
Work composed: 1952-1954 **World premiere:** 1956, Leningrad
Instrumentation: 3 flutes (3rd doubling on Piccolo), 2 oboes, English horn, 3 clarinets (3rd doubling on bass clarinet), 2 bassoons, 4 horns, 3 trumpets, 3 trombones, tuba, timpani, percussion (tambourine, snare drum, bass drum, triangle, suspended cymbal, cymbals), harp, piano, strings

Symphony No.3 in C major, op.67 "Symphony-Poem"
Work composed: 1947 **World premiere:** December 13th, 1947, Moscow
Instrumentation: piccolo, 2flutes, 2 oboes, English horn, 2 clarinets, 2 bassoons, 4 horns, 3 trumpets, 3 trombones, tuba, timpani, percussion (snare drum, bass drum, cymbals, tam-tam), harp, organ, strings, 15 solo trumpets

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