

# Program Notes

Text by Robert Markow

## Shchedrin: "Carmen Suite" (after G. Bizet)

Rodion Shchedrin, who turns 90 this December, is widely regarded as one of the most important and best known Russian composers of his generation. Throughout the years of strong Party control, he was known (in the west, at any rate), as the Soviet Union's "token modernist." Stanley Krebs, in *Soviet Composers and the Development of Soviet Music*, has summarized Shchedrin's music as displaying "impressive technical mastery, preoccupation with sheer sound, use of a folk idiom, eclectic harmony, avoidance of introspection and formal depth, an overwhelming emphasis on program music and vocal-symphonic genres, and point blank communicative aim at the mass audience."

The idea for the 45-minute *Carmen Suite* ballet came from his wife, the famed ballerina Maya Plisetskaya. After long and difficult negotiations, Plisetskaya succeeded in arranging for Alberto Alonso (brother of Alicia Alonso of the famed Ballet Nacional de Cuba) to design the choreography for her. Shchedrin reworked Bizet's score into thirteen numbers, some of which flow into each other without pause. Most of his titles have little to do with Bizet's original. One of the most striking features of Shchedrin's transcription is the instrumentation, which omits all wind instruments but requires, in addition to the standard string section, nearly fifty(!) percussion instruments played by five musicians. The first performance was given by the Bolshoi Ballet in Moscow on April 20, 1967.

A brief introductory passage sets the stage for the story about to unfold. Bells and pizzicato violins quietly reminisce on the Habanera theme through a gentle haze of strings. A huge crescendo leads directly into the next number, the "Aragonaise," the dazzling dance music that opens Act IV of the opera. Spanish to the core, richly imbued with the rhythms and sounds of this land, the music features strumming guitar effects, sinuously flowing melodic lines, and lots of percussion. In the "First Intermezzo," Shchedrin replaces Bizet's voices with the marimba for the scene where young men are entreating Carmen, upon her first entrance, to love them

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today, or maybe tomorrow ... whenever. The menacing Fate motif steals in (violas and cellos) to spoil the good-natured banter, reminding us that this story has a grim ending.

Shchedrin's Suite continues on with a military ditty ("The Changing of the Guard"); Carmen's famous "Habanera"; an electrifying passage from Act II where Carmen and a large cast of outlaws are inviting Don José (her former lover) to join them in their wanton way of life; a soothing "Second Intermezzo" (originally for flute and harp; Shchedrin has other ideas!); a number Shchedrin calls "Bolero," even though there's no bolero in Bizet's opera (it's really the "Farandole" from another Bizet score, *L'Arlésienne*); the entrance music of the proud toreador (bullfighter) Escamillo; another insert from another Bizet score – this time from the opera *La jolie Fille de Perth* (a sensuous theme from the violins accompanied by the suspended cymbal); the return of the "Fate" motif (this time with attitude!); the darkly-mysterious workings of the Fate motif during the "Fortune-Telling" scene; and finally the extended Finale. The epilogue takes us back to the score's opening pages, as all the vibrant colors and violent emotions of the opera fade into the mists of memory.

**RODION SHCHEDRIN:** Born in Moscow, December 16, 1932; now living in Moscow and Munich

**Work composed:** 1967      **World premiere:** April 20, 1967, at the Bolshoi Theater in Moscow

**Instrumentation:** timpani, Percussion I: castanets, 3 cowbells, 4 bongos, guiro, snare drum, bells, vibraphone, marimba; Percussion II: triangle, claves, guiro, 2 wood blocks, tambourine, snare drum, vibraphone, marimba; Percussion III: triangle, crotales, maracas, guiro, chocalho, whip, 3 temple blocks, snare drum, tenor drum, bass drum, tam-tam, glockenspiel; Percussion IV: triangle, charleston, tambourine, 5 tom-toms, bass drum, cymbals, tam-tam, strings

## Tchaikovsky: Excerpts from the ballet "Swan Lake" Op. 20 (Pletnev special edition)

Before Tchaikovsky turned his attention to the ballet, this genre in Russia was already highly fashionable. Performances were attended by the élite of society, even by czars. But the music for these events was invariably weak

and instantly forgettable, often patchworks by a variety of composers and arrangers for threadbare plots and serving merely as an aural backdrop against which dancers went through their paces and stars sustained their prestige. Serious symphonic composers avoided the stigma of writing ballet music. Tchaikovsky changed all that.

Beginning with *Swan Lake* in 1877, and continuing through *Sleeping Beauty* (1890) and *The Nutcracker* (1892), Tchaikovsky's ballet scores elevated the genre immensely through deep musical characterization, symphonic scope, motivic construction, and some of the best music by any standards, balletic or otherwise. All three of these full-length (*i.e.*, an evening's entertainment in several acts) works have entered both the ballet and symphonic repertoires as classics, with *Swan Lake* at the very pinnacle of the world's favorite ballets.

Strangely enough, *Swan lake* was not an immediate hit. In its first production at the Bolshoi Theater in Moscow on March 4, 1877, it was deemed a failure, though for reasons that had nothing to do with the original music. Among other things, the integrity of the score was mercilessly compromised with cuts, alterations, and insertions of unrelated music by other composers. It was dropped from the repertory six years later. In the 1890s, the ballet was given a new lease on life through the efforts of the brilliant and enterprising choreographer Marius Petipa, his assistant Lev Ivanov, and the director of St. Petersburg's Imperial Theaters, Ivan Vsevolozhsky. A performance of the second act alone was given in St. Petersburg in February, 1894, and a full production was unveiled in January 1895, paving the way for the ballet's unending success ever after.

Suites of numbers drawn from *Swan Lake* abound. Conductor Mikhail Pletnev has put together his own, consisting of six substantial passages totaling about 1/3 of the complete score. They run in chronological order, with one exception noted below.

**I.** The Introduction sets the tragic tone of the story. The first sounds we hear are those representing the fate of the swans. A fiery interlude depicts the evil von Rotbart. The curtain goes up on Act I to reveal a large park with a

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castle visible in the background. Prince Siegfried is celebrating his twenty-first birthday. Friends and peasants join him in the festivities.

**II.** This is a *pas de trois*, a sequence of short numbers for three solo dancers as a *divertissement* (entertainment) for the Prince.

**III.** The music that introduces Act II is some of the most famous Tchaikovsky ever wrote. The haunting Swan motif is heard in various instruments, beginning in the solo oboe, passing to the unison horns *fortissimo*, and ending in the bassoons and basses, where it subsides into the dark mists. All this accompanies a scene of swans gliding on a moonlit lake in the forest. Pletnev's suite now returns to Act I, where we hear the Dance with Goblets, preceded by a short introduction. The festive Dance is set to the polonaise rhythm.

**IV.** In this passage we hear excerpts from the extended scene at the forest lake where Prince Siegfried, as a member of a hunting party, encounters Odette, Queen of the Swans. She explains to him that she, like all the other swans, is under a spell by the evil von Rotbart, a spell that prevents her from becoming fully human unless and until a man pledges his undying love and marries her. Siegfried and Odette express their love in a *pas de deux* accompanied by elaborate solos for violin and cello.

**V.** In Act III we are back at the court in the ballroom, where we hear an excerpt from the *pas de six*. Six princesses each do a dance before Prince Siegfried in hopes of becoming his wife.

**VI.** These are the final pages of Act IV, where Siegfried outwits von Rotbart's attempt to thwart his love for Odette. The lovers commit suicide together by drowning, thus confirming the Prince's undying love and ending von Rotbart's spell over all the swans.

**PIOTR ILYICH TCHAIKOVSKY:** Born in Votkinsk, May 7, 1840; died in St. Petersburg, November 6, 1893

**Work composed:** 1875-76    **World premiere:** March 4, 1877, at the Bolshoi Theater in Moscow (complete ballet)

**Instrumentation:** piccolo, 2 flutes, 2 oboes, 2 clarinets, 2 bassoons, 4 horns, 2 cornets, 2 trumpets, 3 trombones, tuba, timpani, percussion (snare drum, bass drum, triangle, cymbals, tam-tam, glockenspiel), harp, strings

Formerly a horn player in the Montreal Symphony, **Robert Markow** now writes program notes for orchestras as well as for numerous other musical organizations in North America and Asia. He taught at Montreal's McGill University for many years, has led music tours to several countries, and writes for numerous leading classical music journals.

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