

Program Notes

by April L. Racana

Sun. March 12 The 891st Bunkamura Orchard Hall Subscription Concert

Mon. March 13 The 108th Tokyo Opera City Subscription Concert

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Sergei Vassilievich Rachmaninov (1873-1943)

Piano Concerto No. 2 in C minor, op. 18

- I. Moderato (ca. 11 min)
- II. Adagio sostenuto (ca. 11 min)
- III. Allegro scherzando (ca. 11 min)

Although Rachmaninov is well known as a successful composer, conductor and performer, it seemed he felt he could only do his best when concentrating on one role at a time. In fact, it was during a composing drought after an unsuccessful performance of his first symphony that he was given the opportunity to focus on his conducting, for which he was received warmly. It was in this same period, when he was battling his own demons regarding his compositional abilities that he went several years with virtually no works forthcoming. Only after sessions with Dr. Nikolay Dahl, did Rachmaninov regain his compositional confidence and it was this Second Piano Concerto that he finally wrote in the summer of 1900.

The second and third movements were performed in December of that same year and were received with such great success that it gave him the needed push to add the first movement. He gave the first performance of the entire work in the fall of 1901, complete with a dedication to Dr. Dahl. The duality of the pianist,

as much accompanist as soloist, is key to the ensemble in the first movement and can be heard in a similar balance of roles throughout the work.

Even though the work was received successfully, he had doubts just five days before its opening, due to some constructive criticism by a friend and former fellow student, which, not surprisingly, gave him pause for thought after the last public performance of one of his symphonies had been such a traumatic failure for him: "I'm simply in despair!... In my opinion the whole movement is spoiled and from this moment I find it positively offensive... and why on earth did you pester me with your analysis five days before the performance...?"

It is perhaps not without reason that Rachmaninov's final score marking, *risoluto*, closes this work – his own resolve clear after regaining his compositional creativeness with such strong musical statements in these three movements, in spite of some unfounded lingering doubts.

Instrumentation: 2 flutes, 2 oboes, 2 clarinets, 2 bassoons, 4 horns, 2 trumpets, 3 trombones, tuba, timpani, percussion (bass drum, cymbals), strings

Peter Ilich Tchaikovsky (1840-1893)**Symphony No. 6 in B minor, op. 74 “Pathétique”**

- I. Adagio-Allegro non troppo (ca. 18 min)
- II. Allegro con grazia (ca. 8 min)
- III. Allegro molto vivace (ca. 9 min)
- IV. Finale. Adagio lamentoso (ca. 11 min)

In 1891, Tchaikovsky had been in America on tour when his usual bouts of self-doubt re-surfaced: “I feel that something within me has gone to pieces.” Not only was he feeling the effects of physical age, but he also questioned whether he had it in him to compose again. A year later, in 1892 he began composing a new symphony but then called it “an empty pattern of sounds without inspiration” and tore it up. In late winter of 1893, he wrote his nephew: “What I need is to believe in myself again for my faith has been greatly undermined; it seems to me my role is over.” It was with these experiences recently in his mind that he finally broke through and began composing this, the Sixth Symphony.

“Just as I was starting on my journey the idea came to me for a new symphony, this time with a program, but a program which will remain an enigma to all. Let them guess it who can. It will be called ‘A Programmatic Symphony.’ During my trip, while composing in my mind, I frequently shed tears. When I got home I settled down to sketch it, and the work went so furiously that I had the first movement completely ready in less than four days and the remaining movements are already clearly

outlined in my head. Half the third movement is already done. There will be much innovation of form in this symphony and incidentally, the finale will not be a noisy allegro but, on the contrary, a long drawn-out adagio. You can’t imagine what bliss I feel, being convinced that my time is not yet passed and I can still work. Perhaps, of course, I’m mistaken, but I don’t think so.”

Indeed, Tchaikovsky’s persistent self-doubt continued to raise its ugly head, even amidst his own exuberation at finding his creative juices flowing again. Yet he did indeed incorporate innovative form in this symphony. The foremost of these being the 5/4 meter used in the second movement, beautifully wrought in a pseudo-waltz feel; as well as the unusual third movement with its uplifting march, which many often mistake as being the finale; and last but not least, as he mentioned in his correspondence with his nephew, contrary to the usual custom, the slow movement was relegated to the last, emphasizing to the very depths, the descending scales found throughout the symphony.

This, the Sixth Symphony ultimately came to be described as one of a trilogy, linked inexorably with the Fourth and Fifth Symphonies not only because all three were written in succession during the years between 1878 and 1893, but most of all because of the composer’s near obsession with a ‘fate’ theme that became a common unifying force in

each of these works. It was an emotional time of turmoil in Tchaikovsky’s life as he struggled to come to terms with personal issues in his life; his death coming only shortly after the last of these three ‘fateful’ works was premiered.

On October 28th, 1893, following its premiere, Tchaikovsky, in conversation with his brother Modest, contemplated an alternate ‘name’ for this symphony that could be sent with the manuscript to the publisher. It was after some deliberation that ‘pathétique’ was settled on. And although much debate surrounds the untimely death of the composer within days following its premiere, that he may

have either been writing his own requiem (with references to the Mass for the Dead throughout), or perhaps even more likely, reflecting on the recent deaths of several dear friends, there is no doubt that as Tchaikovsky himself states: “Without exaggeration, I have put my whole soul into this work.” And in a note to his publisher: “I give you my word that never in my life have I been so contented, so proud, so happy, in the knowledge that I have written a good piece.”

Instrumentation: 3 flutes (3rd doubling on piccolo), 2 oboes, 2 clarinets, 2 bassoons, 4 horns, 2 trumpets, 3 trombones, tuba, timpani, percussion (bass drum, cymbals, tam-tam), strings

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