

# Program Notes

by April L. Racana

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June

## Sergei Vassilievich Rachmaninov (1873-1943) Piano Concerto No. 2 in C minor, Op. 18

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 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, which 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 it's 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 his symphony 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.

**Work composed:** 1901 **World premiere:** November 9, 1901 in Moscow: Philharmonic Society Concert, piano solo by the composer

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

## Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky (1840-1893) Symphony No. 5 in E minor, Op. 64

In May of 1888, Tchaikovsky wrote to his brother Modeste: “To speak frankly, I feel as yet no impulse for creative work. What does this mean? Have I written myself out? No ideas, no inclination! Still, I am hoping to

collect, little by little, material for a symphony.” It had been three years since the composer had written a major work for orchestra, and the previous one, the *‘Manfred’ Symphony* (1885), had not been successfully received. Prior to this, it had been ten years since his previous orchestral attempt, the *Violin Concerto* (1878).

All of this reinforced Tchaikovsky’s usual musical self-doubts, yet somehow he persevered, in spite of the emotional and physical constraints on him – his health continuing to plague him with difficulties even though he was not yet fifty. By late August his psyche seemed to have nearly turned around when he completed his Fifth Symphony: “I have not blundered; it has turned out well.” However, the premiere in November in St. Petersburg received a rather lukewarm reception and rekindled the composer’s hesitations in his abilities. He even wrote in a letter to his patron Madame von Meck:

“After...performances of my new symphony I have come to the conclusion that it is a failure. There is something repellent, something superfluous, patchy, and insincere, which the public instinctively realizes.... The consciousness of this brings me a sharp twinge of self-dissatisfaction.... Last night I looked through our symphony (no. 4). What a difference! How immeasurably superior it is! It is very, very sad!”

In Hamburg, near the beginning of the following year, however, a repeat performance (apparently one of much higher quality) was received with great praise, not only by the audience and critics, but even Brahms himself attended the performance and gave Tchaikovsky a nod of approval. Once again his own persistence had paid off it seems, in spite of his deep insecurities.

This, the Fifth Symphony ultimately came to be described as one of a trilogy, linked inexorably with the Fourth and Sixth 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.

Unlike the Fourth Symphony, Tchaikovsky did not leave a specific set of program notes for his Fifth Symphony. But after his death, some notes were found amongst his sketches, which gave an indication regarding his ideas for the 'fate' theme in this work:

“Introduction. Complete resignation before Fate, or, which is the same, before the inscrutable predestination of Providence. Allegro (I) Murmurs, doubts, lamentations, reproaches... (II) Shall I throw myself into the embraces of Faith?”

This 'fate' theme can be heard in each of the four movements, opening in the first movement quietly in the clarinets and closing with a triumphal march in the last movement. Similar in many ways to Beethoven's Fifth Symphony, Tchaikovsky represented the journey from struggle in its minor mode, to the ultimate victory march in major intonations. This symbolic overcoming of the difficulties fate presents, is shouted from the rooftops as-it-were between the trumpets and horns to close this triumphant journey.

**Work composed:** 1888 **World premiere:** November 17, 1888 in St. Petersburg, conducted by the composer

**Instrumentation:** 3 flutes (3rd doubling on piccolo), 2 oboes, 2 clarinets, 2 bassoons, 4 horns, 2 trumpets, 3 trombones, tuba, timpani, strings

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