

Orlando Philharmonic 2008-09 “Focus Series” – Russian Dynasty:

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Peter Ilyich Tchaikovsky (1840-1893) – Andante cantabile (orig. from String Quartet No. 1, 2nd movement):

During the frigid winter of 1871, just getting by on a small income as a professor at the Moscow Conservatory, Tchaikovsky came up with the notion of improving his finances by giving a concert of his own works. Knowing that an orchestral event would be too ambitious and expensive to mount, he narrowed his scope to a program of solo and chamber works. It was for this projected concert that Tchaikovsky wrote his first string quartet, the String Quartet in D major, Op. 11, in February of that year.

The Quartet is acclaimed, as the first major quartet to be written by a Russian composer, but is best known for the frequently played second movement, the *Andante cantabile*. An early and irresistible example of the composer’s inimitable lyricism, this slow movement’s melody is based on a folksong Tchaikovsky heard during the summer of 1869 while visiting his sister at the Ukrainian community of Kamenka. The composer remained quite fond of this work and later gave it an arrangement for string orchestra. Biographer David Brown praises the *Andante cantabile*’s first forty-nine measures as “one of the most successful of all attempts to merge folk material into a train of thought which does not deny itself the vaster technical resources of a more sophisticated musical language....”

Peter Ilyich Tchaikovsky (1840-1893) – Meditation for Solo Violin and Strings, Op. 42, No. 1:

Tchaikovsky conceived the *Meditation* as the original middle movement of his famous Violin Concerto. It was written in March of 1878 while he was vacationing at Clarens on Switzerland’s Lake Geneva. While there, he was inspired to write his violin concerto after hearing a performance of Édouard Lalo’s *Symphonie Espagnole*. After heeding the advice of violinist friend Joseph Kotek, who thought the original slow movement too long and emotionally out of synch with the rest of the concerto, Tchaikovsky decided to discard it in favor of the briefer and lovely *Canzonetta*.

Later that year, the composer’s benefactress, the Madame von Meck, went abroad and invited Tchaikovsky to spend the summer relaxing at her estate at Brailov in the Ukraine. He fell in love with the home and the environs, and in a letter to the Mme. wrote: “I continue to be very pleased with Brailov.... Everything is perfect, and the house is more like a town house, large, luxurious and very comfortable. I like the garden more and more.... Plenty of scope for imagination.”

In appreciation of Mme. von Meck’s generosity and hospitality, Tchaikovsky wrote for her a set of three violin and piano pieces, which he collectively titled *Souvenir d’un lieu cher* (“Souvenir of a Cherished Place”). The last two movements – the *Scherzo* and a *Melodie* – were composed at Brailov, but the first was the resurrected *Meditation*, the piece left over from his original sketches for the Violin Concerto. Later, the noted Russian composer Alexander Glazunov gave it a convincing orchestration. Interestingly, brilliant violin virtuoso Joshua Bell goes so far as to claim that the *Meditation* makes for

“a more substantial, and in some ways more moving slow movement than the one we use now [in the Violin Concerto].”

Peter Ilyich Tchaikovsky (1840-1893) – Serenade for Strings in C major, Op. 48:

Tchaikovsky was effusive in expressing his lifelong affection what remained a favorite among his creations. In a letter to his publisher, he proudly proclaimed, “I am terribly in love with this work, and can’t wait for it to be played.” And in correspondence to his patroness and friend, Madame von Meck, in October, 1880, he proudly wrote: “The Serenade ... I wrote from an inward impulse; I felt it, and venture to hope that this work is not without artistic merit.” Interestingly, at almost the same time Tchaikovsky wrote his *1812 Overture*, fulfilling a request to write some festive music in commemoration of the Silver Jubilee of the coronation of Czar Alexander II. He based what has become one of his most popular works on several popular themes depicting one of his Mother Country’s proudest moments, the surrender of Napoleon at Moscow. But despite the *1812*’s wild success, Tchaikovsky found it to be coarse and noisy; lacking in any real artistic value; and admitted that it was written without much warmth or enthusiasm.

Understanding full well that Mme. von Meck would find the Overture bombastic and over-the-top and knowing that she had only heard the Serenade on the piano, Tchaikovsky offered the following defense of his favored work in another letter. “I wish with all my heart that you could hear my Serenade properly performed. It loses so much played on the piano, and I think that the middle movements, as played by the strings, would win your sympathy. As regards the first and last movements, they are merely a play of sounds and do not touch the heart. The first movement is my homage to Mozart: it is intended to be an imitation of his style, and I should be delighted if I thought I had in any way approached my model.” And the pride continues with, “Do not laugh, my dear, at my zeal in standing up for my latest creation. Perhaps my paternal feelings are so warm because it is the youngest child of my fancy.”

The opening *Pezzo in forma di sonatina* is a sincere tribute to the spirit of Mozart. Ever since hearing *Don Giovanni* as a boy, Tchaikovsky idolized Mozart and from time to time, e.g., in the *Orchestral Suite – Mozartiana* – sought to declare his love for the ‘Christ of Music’ (as he would refer to him). The first movement of the Serenade reflects the one composer’s reverence for the other through its humor and deft interplay; and through its adherence to the Classical attributes of balance, elegance, and grace. As Tchaikovsky insisted, the middle movements are especially delightful and memorable. The second movement – an audience favorite frequently performed on its own – is the *Waltz*, notable as one the most charming and elegant examples of the composer’s affinity for the genre. The *Elegy* is an exquisite reverie and a masterpiece in string writing. The *Finale* begins with a slow introduction based on a Russian folk tune, in particular a Volga “hauling song.” A bustling main theme follows and can be traced to the slow introduction of the first movement, returning again toward the end in its original form. The conclusion to this high-spirited movement comes with a final outburst of the exuberant Russian main theme, bringing the *Serenade* to a resounding finish!

Dimitri Shostakovich (1906-1975) – Symphony for Strings in C minor (orig. from String Quartet No. 8, Op. 110) (transcribed for String Orchestra by Rudolf Barshai):

Shostakovich's professional life got off to an auspicious start in 1925 with the dazzling First Symphony. Bruno Walter championed it and gave the young composer a name abroad by introducing it to audiences in Berlin. Shortly thereafter two more successful symphonies followed: *To October*, commemorating the 1917 revolution, and then *The First of May*, honoring International Worker's Day. His 1930 Gogol opera *The Nose* impressed with its satiric edge; his Cello Sonata and String Quartet No. 1 were much admired; and his ballets and film scores were well received. Artistically brazen, Shostakovich continued to stretch and in the early 1930's achieved notoriety for *Lady Macbeth of Mtsensk District*, a melodramatically frank operatic masterpiece often harsh, strident, and vulgar in tone. So successful was the opera that it was performed over eighty times in Leningrad, one hundred times in Moscow, and entered the repertoires of foreign opera houses from Copenhagen to Prague to Cleveland. Shostakovich was hailed around the world as a genius and leapt into his Symphony No. 4 fearless and brimming with confidence.

Then, the crushing blow: the wrath of Joseph Stalin. In January of 1936, Stalin decided to see what all the fuss was about with this much talked about *Lady Macbeth*. Scandalized, Stalin left the theater in Moscow in a rage. Two days later, Stalin dictated the devastating editorial "Muddle Instead of Music" which appeared in the official Party organ, *Pravda*. "The listener is flabbergasted from the first moment by an intentionally ungainly, muddled flood of sounds. Snatches of melody, embryos of musical phrases, drown, escape, and drown once more in crashing, gnashing, and screeching. Following this 'music' is difficult, remembering it is impossible." Later in the article a direct threat was issued to Shostakovich: "This is playing at abstruse things, which could end very badly..." Shostakovich's reaction? "I'll never forget that day," since on that day began "the bitterness that has colored my life grey." "Now everyone knew for sure that I would be destroyed. And the anticipation of that noteworthy event – at least for me – has never left me. From that moment on I was stuck with the label 'enemy of the people' and I don't need to explain what the label meant in those days." By "those days" Shostakovich was referring a time when terror raged across the country and purges took place on a massive scale. He felt certain of arrest and like many other "conspirators" kept a suitcase nearby in case his accusers should come in the night. Shostakovich never was arrested but from that point forward waded neck high in a pool of dread. Ostracized, suicidal, and fearful of the reprisals that would result from his adventurous and radical Symphony No. 4, Shostakovich withdrew the work during rehearsals (it wasn't performed until 1961!).

The Fifth Symphony was written between April and July of 1937. Its November premiere was one of the most eagerly anticipated and sensational in the history of music. Everyone in the audience knew that the disgraced composer's fate hung in the balance. Would the Fifth meet with approval and restore the composer's reputation? Or would it elicit Party censure and prove to be the beginning of the end? The result was really nothing short of a miracle. The Party was pleased and declared it a "positive symphony." The Fifth Symphony was given its premiere by the Leningrad Philharmonic under the baton of the great Yevgeny Mravinsky in November of 1937. At that historic

performance, audience members were profoundly moved by an overwhelming cathartic musical experience. Many found themselves openly weeping, and at the performance's end a spontaneous and deafening ovation erupted lasting half an hour, with the composer being called to the platform over and over again and with Maestro Mravinsky seen symbolically holding the score high over head.

In the Symphony No. 6 that followed, Shostakovich produced a work whose pair of jovial and light movements counterbalances a gloomy and intense opening. Put together, they are shorter than the opening Largo, and the contrast their cheerfulness and wit presents gives the symphony a somewhat split personality. The work made an unfortunate underwhelming impression on audience and critics alike.

The Seventh Symphony was quite another story. Inspired by the brutal Nazi assault on Leningrad, Shostakovich wrote one of the most forceful and impressive of all modern symphonies. First performed in early 1942, the sprawling and programmatic *Leningrad* came to symbolize both at home in the USSR and abroad the heroic Soviet struggle against Hitler. It became a brilliant emblem of Soviet patriotic feeling.

The enormous international success of the Seventh, as nice as it must have been for the composer, actually came to haunt Shostakovich in later years. When compared to it, his subsequent symphonies were deemed to be emotionally and ideologically deficient by always-on-the-lookout Communist Party bureaucrats and official critics. Finished up the following year in 1943, the Eighth Symphony was judged to be excessively gloomy and given to despair, especially in view of the improving fortunes of the Red Army at Stalingrad and elsewhere.

Similarly, great expectations were in place to meet the Ninth Symphony upon its premiere in the November of 1945: its role was to serve as a transcendent paean to peace; a celebration of the Soviet victory over Germany; and as an affirmation of good against evil. As conductor Dmitri Rabinovich recalled, "We were prepared to listen to a new, monumental musical fresco...something that we had a right to expect from the author of the Seventh and Eighth Symphonies, especially at a time when the Soviet people and the whole world were still full of the recent victory over Fascism."

But Shostakovich thumbed his nose at these expectations by offering instead a smaller-scale, undramatic and transparent neo-Classical affair of less than a half-hour. The composer remarked that: "'They' (Stalin and the Soviet hierarchy) wanted a fanfare from me, and ode; they wanted me to write a majestic Ninth Symphony (in the grand tradition of Beethoven)." In *Testimony: The Memoirs of Dmitri Shostakovich*, Shostakovich bitterly revealed his difficulty in writing such a work: "I doubt that Stalin ever questioned his own genius or greatness. But when the war against Hitler was won, Stalin went off the deep end. He was like a frog puffing himself up to the size of the ox, with the difference that everyone around him already considered Stalin to be the ox, and him an ox's due. Everyone praised Stalin, and now I was supposed to join in this unholy affair. There was an appropriate excuse. We had ended the war victoriously; no matter what the cost, the important thing was that we had won, the empire had expanded. And they demanded that Shostakovich use quadruple winds, choir and soloists to hail the leader. All the more because Stalin found the number auspicious: the Ninth Symphony...[but] I couldn't write an apotheosis to Stalin, I simply couldn't."

Fast-forwarding two decades, Shostakovich was again prompted – at least ostensibly – to relate his feelings about the War into music. About a half century ago, in July of 1960,

he traveled to Dresden to compose the background music for a joint Soviet/East German film documenting the horrors of the Second World War called *Five Days, Five Nights*. Dresden was a city that was literally pulverized by the Third Reich, reduced to mere rubble in a single night from some of the most devastating bombing in the history of warfare. Shostakovich was so moved by such annihilation and misery that in a matter of only three days he poured forth his feelings and completed his Eighth String Quartet.

The Quartet bore this dedication: “To the Memory of the Victims of War and Fascism.” But in *Testimony*, Shostakovich’s purported memoirs, edited by Solomon Volkov, the composer carefully explains, “Naturally, fascism is repugnant to me, but not only German fascism, any form of it is repugnant. Nowadays people like to recall the prewar period as an idyllic time, saying that everything was fine until Hitler bothered us. Hitler is a criminal, that’s clear, but so is Stalin. I feel for eternal pain for those killed on Stalin’s orders. I suffer for everyone who was tortured, shot, or starved to death. There were millions of them in our country before the war with Hitler began.”

Notwithstanding the dedication and immediate impetus for the Eighth’s creation, far more lies behind the work. As is so often the case with the complex Shostakovich, buried within are his own inner conflicts and oppressive circumstances. It is a tragic self-meditation and tells the story of the tortured soul of the composer himself. Again from *Testimony*: “When I wrote the Eighth Quartet, it was also assigned to the department of ‘exposing fascism.’ You have to be blind and deaf to do that, because everything in the quartet is as clear as a primer. I quote *Lady Macbeth*, the First and Fifth Symphonies. What does fascism have to do with these? The Eighth is an auto-biographical quartet, it quotes a song known to all Russians: ‘Exhausted by the hardships of prison.’”

The Eighth’s essential nature is reflected in the work’s structure, characterized throughout by a chief motive that could not be more personal. The germ for most of the thematic material is Shostakovich’s musical signature: DSCH – the notes D-E flat-C-B. The note D corresponds to his initial. In German transliteration, the composer’s name begins SCH: S [ess] in German notation equals E-flat, C is C, and H equals B natural.

Shostakovich believed that his quartets were well suited to orchestral transcription. With the composer’s permission, Rudolf Barshai – the founder and then artistic director of the popular Moscow Chamber Orchestra – transformed the Eighth String Quartet into the Chamber Symphony for Strings. The composer approved of Barshai’s orchestration, the work became an enormous success, and was then added to the list of Shostakovich’s works at Op. 110a.