

Tchaikovsky's Fifth Symphony

ONE-MINUTE NOTES

Bartók: Music for Strings, Percussion and Celesta

This work demonstrates the enormous spectrum of sound color possible without woodwinds or brass.

Treating piano, xylophone and celesta as pitched percussion and harp as part of the string family, Bartók mesmerizes us with hazy washes of sound and brilliant cloudbursts of exuberant joy.

Tchaikovsky: Symphony No. 5

A slow march in the first movement of this beloved symphony gains passion and momentum as it unfolds. The unforgettable Andante cantabile horn solo will touch your heart. Tchaikovsky's waltz reminds us he was a great ballet composer, while his triumphant finale brings satisfying closure.

BARTÓK: Music for Strings, Percussion and Celesta, Sz. 106, BB 114

BÉLA BARTÓK

Born: March 25, 1881, in Nagyszentmiklós, Transylvania (Hungary)

Died: September 26, 1945, in New York, New York

Composed: June to 7 September 1936

World Premiere: January 21, 1937, in Basel, Switzerland. Paul Sacher conducted the Basel Chamber Orchestra.

NJSO Premiere: 1985–86 season. George Manahan conducted.

Duration: 27 minutes

As the shadow of Nazism lengthened over Europe in the mid-1930s, Béla Bartók dug in his heels philosophically. A fierce opponent of fascism, he categorically refused to perform concerts in Nazi Germany, and he declined even radio broadcast performances of his compositions in either Germany or Italy. At the same time, his fierce loyalty to his own country, and his love of Central Europe's rich musical heritage,

resurfaced in his composition.

Early in his career, he and his countryman Zoltán Kodály had conducted important ethnomusicological research into the folk music of remote sectors in Hungary, Slovakia and Romania. Many of these indigenous songs and dances had never been notated; they were passed by oral tradition from one generation to the next. Many of Bartók's and Kodály's early works incorporated melodies and dance rhythms from these regions.

During the 1910s and 20s, Bartók went through a more expressionist period, embracing a harsher, more dissonant harmonic language and, for programmatic pieces (songs, ballets, opera), socially provocative topics. In the 1930s, he evolved toward a more homogeneous style, returning to modal or diatonic harmonies, borrowing anew from the Eastern European folk music he had researched in his youth, and drawing these elements together in rigorously organized formal units.

His *Music for Strings, Percussion and Celesta* is a prime example. The piece was Bartók's first commission from Paul Sacher, conductor of the Basel Chamber Orchestra and a significant patron of new music in Europe. (Sacher also commissioned works by Stravinsky, Martinů, Honegger, Hindemith and others; his advocacy continued well into the later 20th century.) Sacher would subsequently commission Bartók's *Sonata for Two Pianos and Percussion* (1937), *Divertimento* (1939) and *String Quartet No. 6* (1939). He requested this first piece from Bartók in honor of the Orchestra's 10th anniversary.

Bartók had always had an affinity for precise sound effects in both pitched and unpitched percussion instruments. In *Music for Strings, Percussion and Celesta*, he uses percussion sparingly, yet with immense imagination and coloristic variety. As for the strings, they benefitted from the additional experience he had gained through writing his Third, Fourth and Fifth String Quartets. For this work, he divided the strings into two antiphonal groups, maximizing the possibilities for complex textures—he begins with a fugue—and throwing the different string registers into sharp relief.

The overall structure is slow-fast-slow-fast. The second movement is the closest to a traditional sonata-allegro form, and the slow third movement is an arch, a form that Bartók favored increasingly in his later years. That stated, in addition to the obvious differences in pace and energy level, what emerges most clearly for the listener is the stark contrast between misty washes of sound—the two slow movements—and a vigorous

embrace of exuberant dance rhythms and clear snippets of melody.

Perhaps most fascinating is Bartók's sparing and subtle use of the percussion family, particularly in the slow movements. For example, the opening *Andante tranquillo* starts with violas, who are joined in canonic entrances by violins, then the cellos, eventually expanding to six parts. Not until several minutes in does the timpani make an appearance with a slow rumble, but it evaporates, letting the strings continue their buildup in dense counterpoint. Cymbals and celesta make brief appearances, the one interrupting and the other enhancing the mysterious, otherworldly atmosphere.

Bartók's *Allegro* challenges the antiphonal strings with virtuosic writing. The inherent energy is driven, frenzied, sometimes violent, but also with moments of delicacy. Piano and xylophone provide color and punctuation, while Bartók treats harp as a member of the string family.

Timpani and xylophone open the symmetrical *Adagio* [A-B-C-B-A]. Sliding strings herald an episode of "night music," a distinctive, recurrent aspect of Bartók's style from the mid-1920s on. Something of a misnomer, the term more accurately refers to the mysterious, almost supernatural sounds of the night as it gives way to daybreak, at the moment when nature is coming alive. Always fascinated by the sounds of nature, Bartók frequently incorporated twittering, chirping, buzzing effects into his music. In *Music for Strings, Percussion and Celesta*, he uses high solo violins, celesta, harp, piano and *tremolandi* strings to establish nature's magical shimmer. Careful listeners may catch snippets of the first movement theme, which recurs as transitions between the five sections.

That same first movement theme recurs more recognizably in the finale, a resolutely positive conclusion to this diverse composition. Toward the end, Bartók restates the opening fugue subject, now transformed to diatonic language. That transformation enables a brilliant closing flourish in bright A major.

Instrumentation: timpani, bass drum, two pair cymbals, snare drum, side drum without snares, tam tam, xylophone, harp, celesta, piano and double strings.

TCHAIKOVSKY: *Symphony No. 5 in E Minor, Op. 64*

Peter Ilyich Tchaikovsky

Born: May 7, 1840, in Votkinsk, Viatka district, Russia

Died: November 6, 1893, in St. Petersburg, Russia

Composed: May–August 1888

World Premiere: November 17, 1888, in St. Petersburg; the composer conducted.

NJSO Premiere: 1937–38 season. Rene Pollain conducted.

Duration: 50 minutes

If Beethoven and Brahms were intellectual symphonists, Tchaikovsky favored the emotional side of the genre. As is the case with most generalizations, there are plenty of gray areas once one begins to elaborate such statements. Tchaikovsky certainly understood the principles of musical form and development that he had learned during his conservatory training. In fact, he favored those ideals more than most of his Russian contemporaries. Many of them were caught up in a more specifically Russian nationalism, seeking to separate themselves from western musical models and embrace folk music and Russian Orthodox Church melodies into their art music. Even though Tchaikovsky was more classically oriented, he was still an intensely emotional man who regarded music ultimately as a lyrical medium. More to the point, he believed that the symphony was the most lyrical vessel in which to express musical ideas. For him, the symphony was a prism through which the innermost reaches of the human soul could be refracted.

The inherent conflict between these two approaches to the symphony—left brain/right brain, if you will—is at the heart of both the success and the flaws in Tchaikovsky’s Fifth Symphony. There have always been critics of the formal shortcomings in his music, particularly his grasp of first movement sonata form. Yet this work has earned its enormous popularity because of an emotional immediacy in the music that reaches the listener on a very personal level.

Is there any symphony more immediately moving and ingratiating than this one? From its opening measures, where the clarinet declaims a lugubrious Russian march tune, Tchaikovsky’s Fifth grips and retains our emotional involvement. Nowhere is Tchaikovsky less subtle, and nowhere is he more effective. The lovely horn melody that dominates the famous slow movement is one of the triumphs of the symphonic literature: memorable and eminently singable, it stays with us for weeks after a hearing of this symphony.

And the waltz—a bow to Berlioz’s similar ploy in the *Symphonie fantastique*, also replacing the scherzo—is graceful and alluring, ever a reminder that Tchaikovsky was the greatest ballet composer of the 19th century. His reliance on dance rhythms in this symphony, particularly waltzes and marches, contributes to its cyclic unity and emphasizes his innate gift as a composer for the ballet stage.

Tchaikovsky began work on his Fifth Symphony shortly after taking occupancy of his new country house at Frolovskoye, near Klin. He moved there in April 1888, and at first was entranced by gardening and the natural beauty of his surroundings. By midsummer, however, the urge to compose had returned. He commenced work on the E-minor symphony, his first in over a decade, and was orchestrating by August. The premiere performances took place that autumn in St. Petersburg. Their failure depressed Tchaikovsky, whose opinion of his own new compositions tended to vacillate wildly with public and critical opinion.

He was much encouraged by Johannes Brahms’ kind words the following spring in Hamburg, when the new symphony was first heard in Germany on tour. In a letter to his brother Modest from Hamburg in March 1889, he wrote: “Brahms stayed an extra day to hear my symphony and was very kind. We had lunch together after the rehearsal and quite a few drinks. He is very sympathetic and I like his honesty and open-mindedness. Neither he nor the players liked the Finale, which I also think rather horrible.”

But two weeks later, from Hanover, this harsh self-criticism had passed, and he was able to write: “The Fifth Symphony was beautifully played and I have started to love it again—I was beginning to develop an exaggerated negative opinion about it.”

Like its predecessor, the stormy Fourth Symphony, the Fifth focuses on mankind’s futile struggle with destiny. This is, however, a more spiritual work than the F-minor symphony; specifically it deals with man’s spiritual helplessness and inadequacy. These thoughts are most evident in the finale, which opens with great solemnity. But the entire symphony is filled with operatic crescendos and dramatic, sudden shifts in tempo, all of which bespeak a soul in torment, searching for its own catharsis.

Instrumentation: three flutes (third doubling piccolo); oboes, clarinets and bassoons in pairs; four horns; two trumpets; three trombones; tuba; timpani and strings.