NEW JERSEY SYMPHONY
XIAN ZHANG MUSIC DIRECTOR

NOTES ON THE PROGRAM

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Conrad Tao Plays Tchaikovsky

ONE-MINUTE NOTES

Conrad Tao *Spoonfuls* for Piano and Orchestra (East Coast Premiere)

The multi-talented Conrad Tao has a keen interest in jazz. His point of departure for *Spoonfuls* was a 1929 Charlie Patton tune called "A Spoonful Blues." Tao's piece is two movements freely based on Patton's chord progression. He describes the first movement as "a kind of dance music: spoonfuls perpetually on the verge of overflowing, outgrowths of different grooves . . . the malleable pulse, the embracing of noise." The second movement focuses on Patton's chord progression, plumbing it with full orchestral splendor.

Dmitri Shostakovich Symphony No. 9 in E-flat Major, Op. 70

Prepare yourself for a surprise: in the Ninth Symphony, the often-melancholic Shostakovich has a big grin on his face and a twinkle in his eye. Transparent chamber music sonorities and a light touch make this Symphony a cousin of Prokofiev's "Classical" Symphony. The last three movements are played without pause.

Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky Piano Concerto No. 1 in B-flat Minor, Op. 23

No concerto opening is more famous than Tchaikovsky's First Piano Concerto. Thundering piano chords and a gorgeous orchestral theme set the stage for drama. A French folk tune provides thematic material for the slow movement. Tchaikovsky uses Russian and Ukrainian folk songs for the finale, a lively Cossack dance.

Conrad Tao *Spoonfuls* for Piano and Orchestra (East Coast Premiere)

Conrad Tao

Born: June 12, 1994, in Urbana, Illinois

Composed: 2019

World Premiere: January 25, 2020, in Germantown, Tennessee. The composer was the soloist with the Iris Orchestra.

New Jersey Symphony Premiere: These performances are the East Coast and New Jersey Symphony premiere.

Duration: 10 minutes

Instrumentation: two flutes (first doubling piccolo), two oboes (second doubling English horn), two clarinets, two bassoons (second doubling contrabassoon), four horns, two trumpets, timpani, solo piano and strings.

Pianist, composer, violinist and electronic musician Conrad Tao has been a major presence in classical music for more than a decade now—and he is only 27. A prodigy, he has been composing since he was a small child. He remembers playing melodies by ear at the piano when he was a toddler. He soon started formal piano lessons and played his first concerto with an orchestra at age 8. By the time he was 9, his parents had sought out proper training in composition for him as well.

Before he was out of his teens, Tao had acquired a thorough foundation in Western composition. He has received *eight* ASCAP Morton Gould Young Composer awards and the Avery Fisher Career Grant. He was also named a Gilmore Young Artist, a biennial award that highlights the most promising American pianists of the younger generation. In addition to a jam-packed career as soloist and recitalist, he's had his compositions performed throughout the US. Tao's wide-ranging interests include world music, the avant-garde and extended instrumental techniques. He is a graduate of the Columbia-Juilliard joint degree program.

One of his most recent compositions, *Spoonfuls*, was commissioned by the Iris Orchestra to commemorate the bicentennial of the city of Memphis, Tennessee. Tao's point of departure was a Charley Patton tune, "A Spoonful Blues," that he'd known for many years. "I ended up exploring the Delta blues lineage more broadly," he told the *Memphis Flyer* at the time of the premiere. "I wanted to consider the different roles and legacies of blues music . . . to offer a perspective on it that was personal." In the same interview, he observed:

> "A Spoonful Blues" is a blues tune about cocaine addiction, but to simply call it that would miss the point. It's this meeting point between the very social and boisterous and fun aspect of this music paired with the subject material. The word 'spoonful' is basically the final word of each line in the song, except that Patton [doesn't speak the word]; it's taken by his guitar. I loved that: the instrument is the only honest expression of the idea. . . . I'm interested in that kind of excess in music in general: any moment when something feels like it's been exceeded.

The two movements of *Spoonfuls* channels Patton's tune through Tao's modern lens. His composer's note explains the metamorphosis.

> Charlie Patton's "A Spoonful Blues" is a great dance tune. In the song's 1929 recording, the meter seems stable at first blush but, upon closer listening, is constantly expanding and retracting, wriggling out of any single time signature and into a more elusive, irregular, groovy rhythmic space. The tempo, too, slides forward from its initial easygoing stroll—imperceptibly at first—and then the whole tune is bouncing by the end, careening at last into a hard 4/4 swing.
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> "A Spoonful Blues" is also a song about cocaine addiction. Patton's first utterance is spoken, not sung: "I'm about to go to jail about this spoonful." This is the only time the word "spoonful" actually is heard in full: for the rest of the song, "spoonful" is abstracted, a twanging gesture played by the slide guitar, "spoon-ful," the first syllable a blurred rising semitone. The craving, relayed with near-giddiness, is so great, so full, that it can only be expressed in excess of language. And so Patton's slide guitar finishes his sentences:
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> "It's mens on Parchman (done lifetime) just 'bout a... [spoon-ful]" "I go to bed, get up and wanna fight 'bout a... [spoon-ful]"
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> My piece is in two movements. The first movement is a kind of dance music: spoonfuls perpetually on the verge of overflowing, outgrowths of different grooves, the music trying to keep its balance while also holding in relation to one another all the particular excesses of the song, the malleable pulse, the embracing of noise. The second movement hones in on the chord progression of Patton's tune and luxuriates in it.

Spoonfuls is a free fantasy on Patton's song, with marked contrast between movements. The first is jagged, distorted and atonal, punctuated by violent thumps from timpani. Silence emerges as an equally important factor as sound. Strings open the second *Spoonful*, playing without vibrato. Warm chords, initially tonal, thicken with added notes. Eventually they fracture into crazed dialogue, with recurring fragments of the original tune. Tao's conclusion is unexpected and witty.

Dmitri Shostakovich: Symphony No. 9 in E-flat Major, Op. 70

Dmitri Shostakovich

Born: September 25, 1906, in St. Petersburg, Russia

Died: August 9, 1975, in Moscow, USSR

Composed: 1945

Duration: 27 minutes

World Premiere: November 3, 1945, in St. Petersburg. Yevgeny Mravinsky conducted the Leningrad Philharmonic.

New Jersey Symphony Premiere: 1991–92 season. Hugh Wolff conducted.

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

We don't necessarily think of music, or even the arts in general, when we consider commentaries about the political situation. During the Second World War, that was not the case. In the United States and Britain, as well as the Axis countries, music was another way to express patriotism. Art works could also reinforce propaganda.

Dmitri Shostakovich was a powerful spokesperson for Joseph Stalin's Soviet regime through his music. Whether he intended to serve the needs of the state remains controversial [see sidebar]. Regardless of his intent, there is no question that his Seventh Symphony, the "Leningrad" (1941; premiered 1942) was construed as an indictment of Hitler and a shot in the arm for the spirit of suffering Soviet citizenry. His Eighth Symphony, which followed in 1943, was a different kind of indictment, illustrating the horror of war in a different way, with its emulation of missiles shooting through air, grenades exploding and the deathly silence of carnage following battle.

This background is important to an understanding of the symphony on this program. When audiences in the USSR learned that Shostakovich was composing another symphony, the war was nearly over. His public expected him to celebrate victory over the Nazi tyrants and to extol the superiority of Soviet forces and the spirit of the Soviet populace.

Confounding expectations, Shostakovich composed a work that was a celebration of life, energy, optimism: things not available to people during a time of deprivation. The contrast with the "Leningrad" and Eighth Symphonies is enormous. Those two works weighed in at an hour plus; the "Leningrad" can easily exceed 70 minutes. The Ninth is concise: five succinct movements totaling less than 30 minutes. Where the two prior symphonies demand enormous orchestras with quadruple woodwind, expanded percussion and extra brass, the Ninth employs a smaller orchestra like those of the mid-19th century. The scoring is similarly restrained, often approximating the textures of chamber music.

Most dramatic is the change in character. Instead of ponderous, weighty statements, Shostakovich seems intent on emphasizing life's brighter moments. From the bouncy opening theme, his mood is upbeat and energetic. At times the atmosphere is almost circus-like, even slapstick. In the outer movements, his style resembles that of the popular *Festive Overture*.

Shostakovich was a man of complex psychological layers, however, and he finds room for exploring different moods in his inner movements. Specifically, the second-movement Moderato is the emotional heart of the work, and the cryptic Largo reminds us that this composer did not hesitate to ask probing questions through his music. Still, he also had a wicked sense of humor, and it is his wit that prevails at the end of the Ninth.

SIDEBAR: THE NINTH SYMPHONY: A CONTEMPORARY REMINISCENCE

In an article that remained unpublished until 1990, the Soviet musicologist and critic Daniil Zhitomirsky recorded his reminiscences of Shostakovich and reflections on his music. The article, which is translated in Elizabeth Wilson's *Shostakovich: A Life Remembered*, contains the following observations about the Ninth Symphony.

Shostakovich had developed a fatalistic attitude toward what was "demanded" of him, which often had an oppressing effect on him. But actually, in his work on the Ninth Symphony he could no longer subjugate himself to this oppression. As far back as the spring of 1944, Shostakovich had said to a certain Moscow musicologist: "Yes, I am thinking of my next symphony, the Ninth. I would like to employ not only full orchestra but a choir and soloists, if I can find a suitable text; in any case I don't want to be accused of drawing presumptuous analogies.

But in fact in August of that year, at his crude country table at Ivanovo, Shostakovich was creating something entirely different, indeed totally contrary . . . . Instead of a lavish glorification, a modest chamber score emerged. In one of the more favourable reviews of the time it was called a 'Symphony-Scherzo.' I remember how clearly I sensed the novelty of this symphony, its inherent relevance and manifold implications, which were by no means immediately obvious. Superficially there was much that was playful and carefree in the music, even at times a sort of festive swagger; but this then was transformed into something tragic and grotesque. It showed up the senseless vacuity and triteness of that everyday 'rejoicing' which so gratified our authorities."

SIDEBAR: MUSICIANS' CORNER

Many of Shostakovich's large orchestral works are major political statements. That was certainly what his audience expected when the Second World War ended with victory over the Nazis. Instead, Shostakovich surprised his public with the Ninth Symphony, a relatively small-scale work almost Haydnesque in its proportions.

Indeed, the perky first movement is a textbook sonata form, right down to the repeated exposition. The style is traditional, the musical language conservative and the mood light. A persistent, unsuccessful interruption from the trombone invites ridicule and makes it clear that Shostakovich wants to have some fun.

A lovely clarinet solo opens the slow movement, which, at nine minutes, is the longest in this brief symphony. The clarinet introduces a veritable woodwind serenade. Other than cellos and basses playing pizzicato at the start, strings are silent for the entire first section. Only rarely do the strings seize the melodic foreground. It is the clarinet, flute, and piccolo solos that you will remember from this thoughtful meditation.

The scherzo is virtuosic. It goes like the wind and requires great precision from conductor and orchestra. Solo trumpet in the trio section recalls the circus atmosphere of the first movement, but only for the blink of an eye. This entire whirling dervish whooshes through in a scant 2½ minutes. Without pause, Shostakovich plunges us into a grim conversation between low brass, intoning an ominous fanfare and an extended bassoon recitative.

Bassoon also provides transition to the finale and its first thematic statement. A brisk march restores the resolute good cheer of the opening. It might not be the celebration that the Soviet authorities anticipated, but Shostakovich was clearly celebrating *something*.

Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky: Piano Concerto No. 1 in B-flat Minor, Op. 23

Pyotr Ilich Tchaikovsky

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

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

Composed: November 1874–February 1875

Duration: 32 minutes

World Premiere: October 25, 1875, in Boston. Hans von Bülow was the soloist.

New Jersey Symphony Premiere: 1931–32 season. Rudolph Ganz was the soloist; Rene Pollain conducted.

Instrumentation: two flutes, two oboes, two clarinets, two bassoons, four horns, two trumpets, three trombones, timpani, solo piano and strings.

Tchaikovsky's First Piano Concerto is a perennial audience favorite: one of those unforgettable works—like Beethoven's Fifth Symphony—whose opening gambit is immediately recognizable even to the non-music lover. Musical scholar Joseph Kerman, in a wonderful book called *Concerto Conversations*, called it "the best known of all concerto incipits" and described it thus: "The piano chords that crash in after four bars may or may not constitute what is usually thought of as a texture, but they certainly introduce a marvelous sonority. One gets to the point where those invincible ringing chords block out, if they do not drown out, the great tune in the strings. In a stroke, Tchaikovsky has given the piano an edge it will never lose throughout the whole of this relatively contentious composition."

That very argumentative quality is at the heart of what a concerto is about: the fundamental conflict between a lone instrument and the large orchestral ensemble. Ironically, those majestic keyboard chords that Kerman mentions are actually in D flat, the relative major, although the concerto is nominally in B-flat minor. In fact, the odd opening in minor mode never recurs.

Tchaikovsky was fundamentally a man of the theater—and of theatrical instincts. He understood how to maximize the inherent drama of piano plus orchestra. He was not, however, a top-tier pianist, and that gap in his musical expertise led to a lack of self-confidence when composing for keyboard. His letters to his family and his patroness, Nadejhda von Meck, reflect his hesitation about writing a virtuoso work for an instrument he did not play well himself. Late in 1874, he consulted the Russian pianist Nikolai Rubinstein about a new concerto for piano and orchestra he had just completed. Rubinstein's initial reaction was scathing. His harsh criticism included accusing Tchaikovsky of writing unplayable music and stealing others' ideas.

Tchaikovsky was both incensed and deeply wounded. Three years after the fact, he was still smarting, writing to von Meck: "An independent witness of this scene must have concluded that I was a talentless maniac, a scribbler with no notion of composing, who had ventured to lay his rubbish before a famous man. . . . I was not only astounded, but deeply mortified, by the whole scene."

His immediate reaction was to erase Rubinstein's name from the dedication and substitute that of the German pianist and conductor Hans von Bülow. Bülow played the premiere of the B-flat minor concerto in October 1875 while on tour in the United States. In this country the reaction was quite the reverse of Rubinstein's summary judgment. Bülow reported that he was often cheered on to repeat the entire last movement. Shortly after his return to Europe, Tchaikovsky's concerto was introduced to Russian audiences. Rubinstein recanted his initial judgment and went on to become one of its most celebrated interpreters.

The concerto's rough birthing process is an unlikely prologue to one of the greatest success stories in the history of music. This piece has captured and retained the popular imagination as have few others. Perhaps it defies our mental image of Russia as a dark, grey, grim place with little sunlight in winter. Yet when one visits Moscow and sees the brilliant colors and glint of Saint Basil's Cathedral, it changes one's perception.

Russian music and art, as well as architecture, share that brilliant color. This concerto invites a broad palette of color from the performer. From the commanding chords that mark the soloist's entrance to the ferocious Cossack dance that closes the work, Tchaikovsky's First Piano Concerto seduces our ears with warmth, powerful emotions, lyricism and a wealth of persuasive melodies. The familiar themes that anchor the outer movements have origins in Ukrainian folksong, making the concerto a legitimate contender as a nationalist work. The lovely slow movement, on the other hand, draws on French song material, and includes a scherzo-like middle section in elfin contrast and sharp relief to the flamboyant gestures of the opening movement.

Tchaikovsky's biographer Edward Garden has written: "The superbly lyrical and gloriously beautiful slow movement—with its amusingly frivolous scurrying central section based on the French chansonette 'Il faut s'amuser, danser et rire'—acts as a crown to the whole work, or, to put it more appropriately, as an apex to the arch whose bases are the extrovert D-flat-major themes."

While the first movement may be disproportionately long in comparison to the two that follow, the concerto as a whole is hugely successful. Tchaikovsky combines drama and sentiment with dazzling technique to produce a showpiece that is a classic of its kind.