

## **Tchaikovsky's Violin Concerto**

### **ONE-MINUTE NOTES**

#### **Chen Yi: *Landscape Impression* (World Premiere, New Jersey Symphony Commission)**

Chen Yi's music melds Chinese lore (and sometimes Chinese instruments) with Western forms and techniques. She drew her inspiration for *Landscape Impression*, a New Jersey Symphony Centennial Commission, from two ancient Chinese poems by the 11<sup>th</sup> century poet Su Dong-Po. The poems' rich imagery – dark clouds, raindrops, a sudden gale in the first poem; glittering waves, rain haze, and the comparison of the West Lake to a fair lady in the second poem – all these fired her imagination. "Sometimes the evocations are general, elsewhere they are specific," she says. "Mostly, the impressions are general. I wanted to develop the materials, to make the orchestral color stronger and richer toward a climactic ending." She cites folk mountain singing style and raindrops as Chinese-influenced musical content, which she then amplifies via her orchestration.

#### **Igor Stravinsky: Suite from *Pulcinella***

*Pulcinella* was the first of Igor Stravinsky's neoclassical ballets, and one of his first major works after the end of the First World War. For his musical sources, he turned to mid-18th century Italy, reinterpreting delightful *rococo* jewels with the skilled hands of a 20th-century master. The result is a melodious and attractive score. The Suite has become nearly as popular as the suite from Stravinsky's early ballet *Firebird*. His orchestration in *Pulcinella* is clever, approximating the modest proportions of an 18th-century ensemble, yet finding color and variety within those limited resources. A suite with a sunny disposition, *Pulcinella* is also a showpiece for our woodwind principal players.

#### **Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky: Violin Concerto in D Major, Op. 35**

One of the most popular concertos in the literature, Tchaikovsky's Violin Concerto combines ravishing melodies, bristling excitement, and plenty of virtuosity in its outer movements. Ironically, it dates from a tormented time in the composer's life. Tchaikovsky wrestled with homosexuality in an intolerant society that deemed homosexuals aberrant and unacceptable. His Violin Concerto dates from the year after his catastrophic marriage to a young woman with severe emotional problems of her own. He fled the ill-fated union, finding solace in Switzerland's alpine beauty. It was there that he composed this magnificent, inspired concerto. His central *Canzonetta* balances with tenderness and intimacy, while the exuberant finale dazzles from beginning to end.

**Chen Yi: *Landscape Impression***  
**(World Premiere, New Jersey Symphony Commission)**

**Chen Yi**

**Born:** April 4, 1953, in Guangzhou, China

**Composed:** 2023

**World Premiere:** This weekend's performances are the world premiere.

**Duration:** 10 minutes

**Instrumentation:** two flutes (second doubling piccolo), two oboes, two clarinets (second doubling bass clarinet), two bassoons, four horns, three trumpets, three trombones, tuba, timpani, percussion (suspended cymbal, triangle, three temple blocks, bass drum, tam-tam, two bongos, conga), harp, and strings

As with many Chinese American composers, Chen Yi's life and philosophy were formed by China's Cultural Revolution. Her parents were both well-to-do physicians with a keen interest in music. Chen Yi studied both violin and piano from age three. In the late 1960s, she was sent to the Chinese countryside to do forced labor. The experience was pivotal in connecting her to her homeland, its people, and particularly its music. She has said that without the Cultural Revolution, she might never have discovered the power and potential that lay buried in her musical roots. She has written:

Classical music was forbidden during the Cultural Revolution, but I tried to continue playing. Even when I worked for twelve hours a day as a laborer, carrying hundred-pound loads of rocks and mud for irrigation walls, I would play both simple songs to farmers along with excerpts from the standard western classical repertory. It was during that period that I started thinking about the value of individual lives and the importance of education in society. As an artist living in the United States, I feel strongly that I can improve the understanding between people by sharing my music.

When the Beijing Central Conservatory reopened in 1977, Chen Yi became the first Chinese woman to earn a master's degree in composition. In 1986 she came to the United States. Working with Chou Wen-Chung and Mario Davidovsky at Columbia University, she earned her doctorate in 1993. She was soon named composer-in-residence of the Women's Philharmonic, the a cappella vocal ensemble Chanticleer, and Aptos Creative Arts Center in San Francisco. Since 1998, she has taught at University of Missouri-Kansas City, where she holds an endowed professorship. In 2001, Dr. Chen was awarded the Charles Ives Living, a \$225,000 prize awarded every three years by the American Academy of Arts and Letters. She has garnered multiple awards and honors since then.

Chen Yi's career has flourished internationally. Her music is performed regularly in Europe and Asia as well as the Americas. She has returned to China as Visiting Professor at the Beijing Central Conservatory and the Tianjin Conservatory, and holds honorary doctorates from Lawrence University, Baldwin-Wallace College, University of Portland, The New School University, and the University of Hartford. By any measure, she is one

of the most prominent living composers.

Her music melds Chinese lore (and sometimes Chinese instruments) with Western forms and techniques. She drew her inspiration for *Landscape Impression*, a New Jersey Symphony Centennial Commission, from Chinese poetry, as her composer's note explains.

"The music is inspired by two ancient Chinese poems by Su Dong-po (aka Su Shi, 1036-1101), written in 1072 and 1073. The two sister poems are entitled *Landscape* and *The West Lake*. My musical sound imagination came from the text.

*Landscape (1072)*

Like spilt ink dark clouds spread o'er the hills as a pall,  
 Like bouncing pearls, the raindrops in the boat run riot.  
 A sudden rolling gale comes and dispels them all,  
 Below Lake View Pavilion sky-mirrored water's quiet.

*The West Lake (1073)*

The glittering waves delight the eye on sunny days.  
 The dimming hills give a rare view in rainy haze.  
 The West Lake looks like the fair lady at her best.  
 Whether she is richly adorned or plainly dressed.

She adds that the two poems were grouped together as a set. "The poet Su Shi (Su Dong-po in the Song Dynasty) was the mayor of Hangzhou City, where the West Lake is located. The first poem described the landscape when he stood on top of a building by the lake that had been constructed to appreciate the landscape at a specific time of day. The second poem described the beautiful landscape of the West Lake in general."

Chen Yi has lived with these two poems for a long time. She set each of them for four-part chorus in 2003. Although those settings were for two different choral ensembles, she thought of them as linked. *Landscape Impression* unites the two poems in a single orchestral movement. The poems' rich imagery – dark clouds, raindrops, a sudden gale in the first poem; glittering waves, rain haze, and the comparison of the West Lake to the fair lady in the second poem – all these fired her imagination. "Sometimes the evocations are general, elsewhere they are specific," she says. "Mostly, the impressions are general. I wanted to develop the materials, to make the orchestral color stronger and richer toward a climactic ending." She cites folk mountain singing style and raindrops as Chinese-influenced musical content, which she then amplifies via her orchestration.

She also acknowledges her friendship and professional respect for Music Director Xian Zhang. "It is my great

honor to write *Landscape Impression* for the New Jersey Symphony and Xian, especially after she has conducted my other orchestral works nationally and internationally in recent years. I love her passion, energy, and accurate gestures. I treasure her support and look forward to excellent premiere performances in June.”

## Igor Stravinsky: Suite from *Pulcinella*

### Igor Stravinsky

**Born:** June 17, 1882, in Oranienbaum, Russia

**Died:** April 6, 1971, in New York City

**Composed:** 1919-1920, revised in 1949

**World Premiere:** December 22, 1922. Pierre Monteux conducted the Boston Symphony Orchestra.

**New Jersey Symphony Premiere:** 1985-86 season

**Duration:** 24 minutes

**Instrumentation:** two flutes (second doubling piccolo), 2 oboes, 2 bassoons, 2 horns, trumpet, trombone, strings

When Serge Diaghilev, the legendary impresario of the Ballets Russes, suggested in 1919 that Stravinsky turn his attention to music by little-known 18th-century masters with the idea of orchestrating some movements as a ballet score, the composer reacted with skepticism. Diaghilev proposed music of Giovanni Battista Pergolesi (1710-1736), but Stravinsky knew little of Pergolesi’s work beyond the *Stabat Mater* and the opera *La serva padrona*, neither of which interested him.

Then he rifled through the obscure manuscripts Diaghilev had obtained from Italian libraries. Captivated by the music’s simplicity and melodious charm, Stravinsky reconsidered Diaghilev’s proposal. Ultimately the entire project proved too seductive to resist. Diaghilev offered him a kind of package deal: Pablo Picasso would do the sets, and Leonid Massine the choreography. Stravinsky later wrote that his “discovery of the past was the epiphany through which the whole of [his] late work became possible.”

### Neoclassicism: a new phase rooted in tradition

One often hears the term “neoclassical” applied to Stravinsky. *Pulcinella*, the ballet score he composed in response to Diaghilev’s commission, earned that sobriquet for him. It was the first work in which he consciously turned to the rhythms, melodies and textures of an earlier era. Musically, the greatest difficulty in explaining *Pulcinella* is not in the metamorphosis of *rococo* music into a 20th-century score, but the fact that music attributed to Pergolesi turned out not to be by Pergolesi at all! Musical scholars have ascribed nearly all the fragments to Pergolesi’s contemporaries, proving their attribution to Pergolesi to be spurious. Nevertheless, Pergolesi’s name remains closely associated with Stravinsky's score.

### Making old music sound fresh: the Stravinsky touch

Stravinsky left the melodic lines of the 18th-century pieces intact. By the addition of his own music in bridge passages, he succeeded in breaking up the predictability of the original. His personal imprint is both harmonic and rhythmic: the gentle dissonance created by pedal points, and clever adaptations of the dance meters with unexpected repetitions and startling sonorities. Despite the reduced orchestra, the scoring is brilliant and varied.

Two years after the premiere of the ballet in Paris in May 1920, Stravinsky created a concert version of the Suite in eight movements, for the same reduced chamber orchestra forces as the original. In 1949, he made modest revisions to the Suite.

## **Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky: Violin Concerto in D Major, Op. 35**

### **Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky**

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

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

**Composed:** March—April 1878

**World Premiere:** December 4, 1881, in Vienna. Adolf Brodsky was the soloist; Hans Richter conducted the Vienna Philharmonic

**New Jersey Symphony Premiere:** 1943-44 season

**Duration:** 33 minutes

**Instrumentation:** two flutes, two oboes, two clarinets, two bassoons, four horns, two trumpets, timpani, solo violin and strings

Three 19th-century violin concertos with a secure lock in the permanent repertoire are those by Mendelssohn, Brahms and Tchaikovsky. All of them are war horses, but Tchaikovsky's is arguably the most popular of all. Violinists love to play this concerto and audiences love to hear it.

Part of what makes a composition great is that no matter how familiar the music, something fresh remains to be discovered each time we hear it. Sometimes it is a general observation, for example realizing that Tchaikovsky was probably more influenced by the Mendelssohn Violin Concerto than any other predecessor work. More likely, one notices a special moment, such as the grand polonaise that launches the first movement development section, or the passage in the slow movement where Tchaikovsky combines solo clarinet with the violin soloist.

### **Escape from a disastrous, short-lived marriage**

Tchaikovsky composed his Violin Concerto in March and April 1878. He had fled to Clarens, Switzerland on the heels of his brief, ill-fated marriage. He worked on the concerto with the young Russian violinist Josif Kotek, but it was intended for the Hungarian violinist Leopold Auer (1845-1930), who spent 50 years of his career in

St. Petersburg. Unfortunately, Auer rejected the concerto, claiming it was unplayable. Tchaikovsky had to wait until 4 December 1881 for the première. Adolf Brodsky was the soloist; Hans Richter conducted the Vienna Philharmonic.

### **A scathing review, etched permanently in memory**

And then, the press panned it. In a colossal miscalculation, the powerful Viennese critic Eduard Hanslick wrote a blistering review of Tchaikovsky's concerto, asking rhetorically whether it were possible there could be 'music whose stink one could hear.' The composer was devastated. He reportedly was able to quote Hanslick's cruel words by heart for the rest of his life.

In spite of that rough start, this ebullient, heartfelt concerto rapidly became one of the most popular works in the entire literature. We regard it as a masterpiece because of its innate lyricism and direct emotional appeal. Its themes flow so organically from one into the next that it becomes difficult to pinpoint their boundaries. Tchaikovsky benefited from his collaboration with Kotek, producing music that is 'user-friendly' both for the soloist and for the listener. That is not to say the concerto is without its difficulties! Despite its largely lyrical cast, the first movement is crowned by an extremely challenging cadenza that fairly prickles with an array of technical problems.

The mood relaxes for the *Canzonetta*, as Italianate in flavor as its title implies. Simple, heart-on-the-sleeve music, it is generally considered an expression of Tchaikovsky's longing for his homeland. A splendid transition leads to the rondo-finale, the most Russian of all three movements. Strongly linked to the peasant music of Tchaikovsky's native land, it has a powerful Cossack dance influence. As a finale it has everything: unforgettable melody, drama, tenderness and flashy brilliance.