

Neeme Järvi Conducts Tchaikovsky

ONE-MINUTE NOTES

Arvo Pärt: *Cantus in Memoriam Benjamin Britten*

Estonian-born composer Arvo Pärt is associated with mysticism and minimalism. He invented a style he calls *tintinnabuli* that is associated with bell sounds. Some of his works are inspired by Gregorian chant. Pärt greatly admired the English composer Benjamin Britten and was deeply affected when Britten died in 1976. *Cantus in Memoriam Benjamin Britten* is his tribute, and an expression of regret that they never met in person.

William Grant Still: *Symphony No. 1, “Afro-American”*

William Grant Still was the first African American composer to have an impact in classical concert music, as opposed to jazz. That stated, the heritage of jazz, spirituals and traditional hymns all made an impact on Still’s compositions. In 1930, his “Afro-American” Symphony was the first symphony by an African American composer to be performed by a major symphony orchestra. Still later recalled, “I knew I wanted to write a symphony. I knew that it had to be an American work; and I wanted to demonstrate how the Blues, so often considered a lowly expression, could be elevated to the highest musical level.” His use of banjo in the orchestra was an original touch in this major work.

Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky: *Symphony No. 4 in F minor, Op. 36*

Tchaikovsky’s hugely popular Fourth Symphony needs little introduction. Its opening fanfare is an evocation of fate and is closely tied to the composer’s precarious emotional state when he composed it. Over the course of four movements, we experience a gradual progression to a more favorable state of mind. An elegant oboe solo dominates the slow movement. Listen for section solos in the scherzo: first plucked strings, followed by a woodwind choir, then all brass. By the time we reach the finale, Tchaikovsky has transformed his message to a blaze of optimism. The finale starts and ends with a big bang. Every moment of the journey is a pleasure – and a thrill.

Arvo Pärt: *Cantus in Memoriam Benjamin Britten*

Arvo Pärt

Born: September 11, 1935, in Paide, Estonia

Composed: 1977

World Premiere: First performance April 7, 1977, in Tallinn, Estonia with Eri Klas conducting

New Jersey Symphony Premiere: 1989-90 season under Hugh Wolff

Duration: 6 minutes

Instrumentation: string orchestra and chime

Estonian-born Arvo Pärt left the Soviet Union for the west in 1980. Since then, his music has become far better known, and a different picture has emerged of this fascinating composer who bridges so much of Eastern and Western cultures. Early in his career, Pärt went through a serialist phase with a strong emphasis on contrapuntal technique. He also quoted extensively from earlier composers. By 1982, the year he settled in Berlin, he had abandoned serialism but retained the allusions to earlier composers and styles. His music evolved into a deceptively simple idiom often compared to minimalism.

Pärt is primarily a colorist who reveals his palette slowly, allowing time for each timbral change to be thoroughly perceived. He draws his inspiration from a number of sources: mysticism, Renaissance harmony, chant-like melodies and the works of Prokofiev and Shostakovich, which made a strong imprint upon him during his youth. The effect is often mesmerizing.

Since the 1970s, Pärt has composed music that shares certain traits with minimalism. He emphasizes tonality and employs repetitive patterns. Sometimes his long, vocal lines evoke the soothing monotony of medieval organum. He describes his music as *tintinnabulation*, from the Latin word for bells. He has written:

Tintinnabulation is an area I sometimes wander into when I am searching for answers – in my life, my music, my work. In my dark hours, I have the certain feeling that everything outside this one thing has no meaning. The complex and many-faceted only confuses me, and I must search for unity. What is it, this one thing, and how do I find my way to it? Traces of this perfect thing appear in many guises – and everything that is unimportant falls away. Tintinnabulation is like this. . . . The three notes of a triad are like bells. And that is why I call it tintinnabulation.

Bell sounds feature prominently in *Cantus in Memoriam Benjamin Britten* (1977), combining with the timbre of a string ensemble. *The New York Times* critic Allan Kozinn described *Cantus* as "an orchestral threnody in which a touch of Britten's own lush string scoring style invokes the memory of the British composer." In the published score for *Cantus*, Pärt explained:

Why did the date of Benjamin Britten's death – December 4, 1976 – touch such a chord in me? During this time, I was obviously at the point where I could recognize the magnitude of such a loss. . . . I had just discovered Britten for myself. Just before his death, I began to appreciate the unusual purity of his music. And besides, for a long time I had wanted to meet Britten personally, and now it would not come to that."

A single chime opens *Cantus*, providing subtle color and a spiritual element. Pärt explores the sonorous beauty of the strings in different patterns of descending minor scales. The entrances grow progressively slower in their downward trajectory, creating layers of sound that coalesce on a low A-minor chord. Pärt's thought-provoking music leaves us with a sense of bereavement that is also curiously peaceful.

William Grant Still: Symphony No. 1, "Afro-American"

William Grant Still

Born: May 11, 1895, in Woodville, Mississippi

Died: December 3, 1978, in Los Angeles, California

Composed: 1930; revised 1969

World Premiere: October 28, 1931, in Rochester, New York. Howard Hanson led the Rochester Philharmonic.

New Jersey Symphony Premiere: selected movements under Arthur Post in 1992-93 season

Duration: 23 minutes

Instrumentation: three flutes (third doubling piccolo), two oboes, English horn, three clarinets, bass clarinet, two bassoons, four horns, three trumpets, three trombones, tuba, timpani, percussion (vibraphone, triangle, wire brush, small cymbal, cymbals, snare drum, bass drum, gong and bells), harp, celesta, tenor banjo and strings.

No history of American music would be complete without a chapter on William Grant Still. His engaging, attractive orchestral compositions are significant examples in the development of a

specifically American musical style. Further, he was the first major African American composer to have an impact in the realm of classical concert music, rather than jazz. To be sure, the heritage of jazz, spirituals and traditional hymns left their own impact on Still's music, but he was able to incorporate these elements skillfully into musical forms associated with the European tradition. The "Afro-American" Symphony, his best-known composition, is an excellent example.

Still's father, who was a musician, died when he was a baby. His mother moved to Arkansas, where he grew up. Music was always part of his life. His grandmother, who lived with them, sang hymns and spirituals at home. His stepfather, whom his mother married when Still was 11, took him to concerts and operettas. The boy studied violin as an adolescent and began composing almost immediately. He later asserted that he knew he wanted to be a composer by the time he was 16. After matriculating at Wilberforce University, he conducted the university band and did some arranging for them. In spite of his mother's wish that he pursue a career in medicine, the pull of music was too strong. He left Wilberforce before graduating to play in theatre orchestras and to write orchestrations for popular musicians, including such legends as W.C. Handy, Sophie Tucker, Paul Whiteman and Artie Shaw. Eventually, Still continued his formal education at the Oberlin Conservatory of Music (interrupted briefly for military service during World War I), and subsequently studied privately with George Whitefield Chadwick and the French emigré Edgard Varèse.

Still's accomplishments would be impressive for any composer, but they are the more remarkable because he was such a trailblazer. He became the first African American composer in the United States to have a symphony performed by a major orchestra when Howard Hanson led the Rochester Philharmonic in the premiere of this work in 1930. Still was also the first African American to conduct a major orchestra and was among the first to break into the prestigious realm of radio, television and film scores.

The "Afro-American" Symphony was a seminal work on a number of levels. The composer later recalled:

I knew I wanted to write a symphony; I knew that it had to be an American work; and I wanted to demonstrate how the blues, so often considered a lowly expression, could be elevated to the highest musical level.

In a 1936 radio address from the Hollywood Bowl, he embellished these remarks.

We shouldn't ignore jazz and the special qualities it has given to American music on the whole. However, it can't be used in serious music in its present state. It should be idealized for that purpose. That was one of my aims in the 'Afro-American' Symphony when I devised an original theme in the blues idiom and made it the basis for the entire Symphony.

Still's blues theme was a standard three-part, twelve-measure blues. He used it throughout the symphony as a unifying device.

Although the work subdivides into the conventional four movements, they are played without pause. During the sketching process, he labeled 'categories' of themes that expressed a specific emotion or character, marking them with labels like passionate, happy, dramatic, plaintive and barbaric. To further indicate the atmosphere and emotional content of each movement, he incorporated excerpts from the poetry of Paul Laurence Dunbar (1872-1906) in the score. Dunbar's verse, which skillfully uses Black themes and dialect, is a colorful complement to Still's music and enhances our appreciation as listeners. Thus, preceding the first movement:

All my life long twell de night has pas'
 Let de wo'k come ez it will,
 So dat I fin' you, my honey, at last'
 Somewhah des ovah de hill.

We hear a plaintive English horn solo (a favorite solo instrument of Still's) set forth the blues theme, which muted trumpet then echoes. Still's repetition, variation and development of this theme governs the structure of the first movement.

Dunbar's poetry sets a sorrowful mood for the second movement *Adagio*.

It's moughty tiahsome layin' 'roun'
 Dis sorrer-laden earfly groun'
 An' oftentimes I thinks, thinks I
 'Twould be a sweet t'ing des to die
 An' go 'long home.

Solo oboe states the theme, with a related subordinate melody from the flute. Still described this movement as representing “the fervent prayers of a burdened people rising upward to God,” and used harp arpeggios to illustrate that image.

With the third movement, “Animato,” Still provides a complete change of mood, now lighthearted and humorous. Dunbar’s couplet heads the music:

An’ we’ll shout ouah halleluyahs,
On dat mighty reck’nin’ day.

The prominent banjo part is one of the first such uses in a major symphony. Still’s quotation from George Gershwin’s ‘I Got Rhythm’ adds a light touch. When Howard Hanson conducted the Berlin Philharmonic in a performance of this Scherzo in January 1933, the audience flaunted staid German tradition and demanded that it be repeated. In Hitler’s Germany, that was a remarkable occurrence.

To conclude the symphony, Still sets the tone with these affirmative lines from Paul Laurence Dunbar:

Be proud, my Race, in mind and soul.
Thy name is write on Glory’s scroll
In characters of fire.
High mid the clouds of Fame’s bright sky
Thy banner’s blazoned folds now fly,
And truth shall lift them higher.

The music summarizes what we have already heard with references to the music from earlier in the symphony, adding a new theme. Still intended to illustrate the uplifting message of the poetry. He did so, and also added an important symphonic canvas to our American repertoire, one that takes justified pride in our nation’s rich African American heritage.

Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky: Symphony No. 4 in F minor, Op. 36

Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky

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

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

Composed: 1877 to January 1878

World Premiere: February 22, 1878, in Moscow. Nikolai Rubinstein conducted

New Jersey Symphony Premiere: 1932-33 season under Rene Pollain

Duration: 44 minutes

Instrumentation: Two flutes, piccolo, two oboes, two clarinets, two bassoons, 4 horns, 2 trumpets, 3 trombones, tuba, timpani, triangle, cymbals, bass drum and strings

Tchaikovsky's Fourth Symphony is inextricably entwined with the emotional havoc in his life during the year 1877. That was the year he began his remarkable correspondence with Nadezhda Filaretovna von Meck, the wealthy patron who was to provide both emotional sustenance (via her letters) and financial security to the composer for more than a decade. 1877 was also the year that Antonina Milyukova, a former student of Tchaikovsky's, wrote to him with declarations of love and threats of suicide, inexplicably prompting him to propose to her, marry her and leave her within a matter of months. Desperate for emotional stability and wrestling with the torment of his homosexuality, Tchaikovsky sought refuge in the country, in his correspondence and in composing.

Though the Fourth Symphony was begun before the abortive marriage, its history cannot be separated from the anguish of those few unfortunate summer months. More and more, Tchaikovsky turned to Mme. von Meck for spiritual guidance, as confidant and muse. The F-minor symphony was the first work he dedicated to her, and he called it "our symphony" in his letters to her.

Sometimes called the "Fate" symphony, the work earned its nickname from Tchaikovsky's own description. In one of his letters to Mme. von Meck, he sketched a program, identifying the opening brass fanfare as "Fate. . . the sword of Damocles that hangs over our head" and describing the main theme as "feelings of depression and hopelessness." The second theme group he calls "dream world. . . escape from reality." How appallingly real all this must have seemed to him upon realizing the magnitude of the mistake he had made in marrying Antonina! A

third theme combines musical elements from the other two and allows Tchaikovsky to develop his material into a colossal and emotionally intense opening movement.

The slow movement features a mournful oboe solo, one of that instrument's outstanding moments in the symphonic literature. The composer wrote:

This is that melancholy feeling that comes in the evening when, weary from your labor, you are sitting alone, you take a book – but it falls from your hand. There comes a whole host of memories. It is both sad that so much is now past and gone, yet pleasant to recall your youth. You both regret the past, yet do not wish to begin your life again. Life has wearied you. It is pleasant to rest and look around.

On a musico-dramatic level, the “Andantino in moda di canzone” allows the tension of the first movement to abate, but it does not obliterate its impact. The passionate climax is a reminder of the tumult at the beginning of the symphony.

In many ways the most successful and individual movement is the scherzo, which features the orchestra section by section: first strings in a virtuoso pizzicato display, then woodwinds in lyric contrast, then boisterous brass. After each section has its turn, the three are brilliantly interwoven to conclude the movement in anticipation of the brilliant finale. Tchaikovsky was comparatively neutral on any program for this movement, calling its individual sections “capricious arabesques. . . elusive images which rush past in the imagination when you have drunk a little wine and experience the first stage of intoxication.”

The finale explodes with a brilliant, festive flourish in F major, immediately declaring a positive resolution to all the uncertainty, anguish and doom of the symphony's first half. We do not reach that satisfactory conclusion without additional struggle, however. The "fate" motive from the first movement recurs, a significant storm cloud on the horizon. Presently, Tchaikovsky recalls passages from the second and third movements as well, intermingling them with the adapted strains of a Russian folk song. The quotations from the first three movements make the symphony a cyclic structure. Despite references to the "fate" motive, Tchaikovsky succeeds in erasing the clouds in a fiery, exciting conclusion. Scholars and musicians are still debating the extent to which the Fourth Symphony is an emotional autobiography for its composer. What is indisputable is the electric effect that Tchaikovsky's music still has on audiences, nearly 150 years after it was first performed.