



## NOTES ON THE PROGRAM

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# Xian Zhang Debuts as Music Director

### ONE-MINUTE NOTES

#### **Tchaikovsky: Polonaise from *Eugene Onegin***

Who knew that a ballroom dance could pack such a punch? This Polonaise from Tchaikovsky's most famous opera delivers the opulence and ceremony of Russia's aristocratic courts—and provides a festive opening to Xian Zhang's debut concerts as NJSO Music Director.

#### **Tchaikovsky: Piano Concerto No. 1**

No concerto opening is more famous. Thundering piano chords and a gorgeous orchestral theme set the stage for drama. The score blazes with brilliant orchestral and pianistic color throughout.

#### **Tchaikovsky: Symphony No. 5**

Zhang's all-Tchaikovsky program concludes with this beloved symphony that focuses on mankind's struggle with fate. A slow march in the first movement 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.

## **TCHAIKOVSKY: Polonaise from *Eugene Onegin*, Op. 24**

### **PETER ILICH TCHAIKOVSKY**

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

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

**Composed:** between May 1877 and February 1878; full score completed in 1880.

**World Premiere:** A student performance took place in March 1879. The opera premiered at the Bolshoi in Moscow on January 23, 1881.

**NJSO Premiere:** 1979–80 season; Thomas Michalak conducted.

**Duration:** 4 minutes

Polonaises are generally stately, with a pronounced and repeated rhythm in steady triple time. Tchaikovsky's, however, has enormous flair, with large orchestral gestures and the kind of catchy tune that one hums for weeks after a concert. In Tchaikovsky's opera, the Polonaise takes place during an elegant ball in the home of a wealthy Russian noble. We hear an exuberant fanfare summoning the guests to the dance. The brasses continue to punctuate Tchaikovsky's Polonaise with crisp dotted rhythms; woodwinds and cellos offer contrast in the gentler middle section.

*Instrumentation: woodwinds in pairs, four horns, two trumpets, three trombones, timpani and strings.*

## **TCHAIKOVSKY: Piano Concerto No. 1 in B-flat Minor, Op. 23**

### **PETER ILICH TCHAIKOVSKY**

**Composed:** November 1874 to February 1875

**World Premiere:** October 25, 1875, in Boston; Hans von Bulow was the soloist.

**NJSO Premiere:** 1931–32 season. Rudolph Ganz was the soloist; Rene Pollian conducted.

**Duration:** 32 minutes

Tchaikovsky was at the most basic level 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, Nadezhda von Meck, reflect his hesitation about writing a virtuoso work for keyboard. Late in 1874, he consulted the Russian pianist Nikolai Rubinstein about his new concerto for piano and orchestra. Rubinstein's initial reaction was scathing. His harsh criticism included accusing Tchaikovsky of writing unplayable music and stealing others' ideas.

Tchaikovsky's immediate reaction was to erase Rubinstein's name from the dedication and substitute that of the German pianist and conductor Hans von Bulow. Bulow 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. Bulow 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, gray, 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 those vibrant hues. 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.

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.

*Instrumentation: woodwinds in pairs, four horns, two trumpets, three trombones, timpani, strings and solo piano.*

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

**PETER ILICH TCHAIKOVSKY**

**Composed:** May–August 1888

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

**NJSO Premiere:** 1937–38 season; Rene Pollian 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. 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.

Is there any symphony more immediately moving and ingratiating than Tchaikovsky's Fifth? From its opening measures, where the clarinet declaims a lugubrious Russian march tune, this symphony 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 lingers in the mind's ear after a hearing of this symphony.

And the waltz 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.

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.*