

## **Xian Zhang Conducts Tchaikovsky 4**

**TCHAIKOVSKY: *Marche slave*, Op. 31**

**Pyotr Ilich Tchaikovsky**

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

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

*Composed: autumn 1876*

*World premiere: November 18, 1876, at a benefit concert for the Russian Musical Society in Moscow.*

*NJSO premiere: 1943–44 season; Frieder Weissmann conducted.*

*Duration: 10 minutes*

In June 1876, Turkish soldiers massacred a group of Slavic Christians in the Balkans. Montenegro and Serbia immediately retaliated in protest, and war broke out. To the north, Russia observed the conflict with keen interest. Pro-Serbian support ran strong in Russia, a nation of Slavs. Tsar Alexander sided with Serbia, with an eye toward reclaiming land he had forfeited during the Crimean War. By autumn, organized aid for war victims had sprung up.

In early October, conductor and pianist Nikolai Rubinstein asked Tchaikovsky to write a special piece to be presented at a benefit concert on behalf of Serbian soldiers who had fallen in battle and Russian volunteers going to help them. Swept by patriotic fervor, Tchaikovsky responded with unaccustomed rapidity. First, he obtained a collection of Serbian songs in search of appropriate thematic material. He then adjusted three of the melodies he found, in order to suit his compositional needs. Within days, he had composed and scored *Marche slave*.

The resulting composition is a mish-mosh of Serbian tunes that sound strikingly like Tchaikovsky's original themes. He also incorporated the Russian national anthem, "God Preserve the Tsar," which he used in several other compositions, most notably the *1812 Overture*. The rabble-rousing coda to the *Marche slave* was specifically designed to stir the audience and encourage their support for the military cause. Tchaikovsky knew that the March was not a great work, yet he recognized the effectiveness of his fine orchestral setting. As Ralph Wood has observed: "It is an expert, in a superficial way extremely stirring, piece of work—conventional in essence but with a veneer of striking originalities."

The Turks defeated the Serbs, which resulted in Russia's declaration of war on Turkey in 1877, a conflict that very nearly pitched all of western Europe into war; that crisis was averted by the Congress of Berlin in 1878. Tchaikovsky's march has outlived its initial jingoistic function because of characteristic themes, brilliant orchestration and the spirited conclusion.

*Instrumentation: woodwinds in pairs (including two piccolos), four horns, two trumpets, two cornets, two trombones, tuba, timpani, snare drum, cymbals, bass drum, tam-tam and strings.*

### **BARBER: Concerto for Violin and Orchestra, Op.14**

#### **Samuel Barber**

*Born: March 9, 1910, in West Chester, Pennsylvania*

*Died: January 23, 1981, in New York, New York*

*Composed: summer 1939 to July 1940; revised 1948*

*World premiere: February 7, 1941, in Philadelphia. Albert Spalding was the soloist; Eugene Ormandy conducted the Philadelphia Orchestra.*

*NJSO premiere: 1987–88 season. Ida Levin was the soloist, Michael Pratt conducted.*

*Duration: 25 minutes*

It seems a pity that a wonderful composer like Samuel Barber should be known to most concertgoers only through his *Adagio for Strings* (1936). While some listeners may also be familiar with Barber's early Overture to *The School for Scandal* (1933) and opera buffs might know *Vanessa* (1958) or *Antony and Cleopatra* (1966), he is essentially perceived as a one-work composer, like Johann Pachelbel for the ever present Canon in D, or Paul Dukas for *The Sorcerer's Apprentice*. Fortunately for us, Barber was a prodigiously talented and versatile musician who left a wealth of other compositions to enrich the repertoire.

### **SAMUEL BARBER AND SHIFTING TASTES IN THE 20TH CENTURY**

During the first half of the 20th century, violin soloists appearing with orchestras favored a relatively small repertoire of concerti. The four 19th-century German titans in the genre—Beethoven, Mendelssohn, Bruch and Brahms—accounted for a disproportionate number of violin concerto performances. Tchaikovsky, Wieniawski and Saint-Saëns were close runners-up, and Lalo's *Symphonie espagnole* had a number of champions attracted by its sparkle and Latin panache.

In the second half of the 20th century, tastes expanded and shifted. Mozart's relatively early violin concerti became mainstream, and Bach's concerti found their way into the concert hall with some regularity. Contemporary composers whose music was cutting-edge before the Second World War—Prokofiev, Stravinsky, Shostakovich, Bartók, even Sibelius—were less threatening to audiences that had become more acclimated to their musical language. With the exception of Sibelius, their violin concerti have not become staples of the repertoire, but these works receive occasional performances and are accepted as important contributions to the literature.

If we consider that background, the astonishing success of Barber's Violin Concerto is all the more remarkable. To begin with, Barber was American. The United States was an upstart country, and its classical composers were slow to gain acceptance here or abroad.

Vocal line and rich melody are the overriding characteristics of Barber's music. This is true of his

instrumental works as well as the works for voice. An unabashed romantic in an era of dizzying musical change and experimentation, Barber acknowledged modernism without ever turning his back on the rich tonal tradition that gave rise to so many other “isms” of 20th-century music. Nowhere is his gift more evident or immediately accessible than in his Violin Concerto, completed in 1939. This Janus-faced piece embraces the old guard of diatonicism and ventures forth into less well-charted rhythmic and atonal waters. Its oddly duplicitous musical personality is the more arresting because of the coincidence of its composition in the very early days of the Second World War. Forced to leave Europe as war loomed, Barber composed the first two movements in Europe, completing the concerto back in the United States.

Long, expressive melodic lines that celebrate the essentially lyrical character of the violin dominate the first two movements. They stand in marked contrast to the nervous, aggressive excitement of the finale. While we are never in doubt that the violinist is the boss in this piece, Barber makes imaginative use of his orchestra. He incorporates piano—an unusual component of a violin concerto’s accompanying fabric—with such understated skill that the keyboard is never conspicuous. Similarly, he includes effective orchestral solos, most prominently for clarinet in the first movement, for oboe in the *Andante sostenuto*, and briefly, for timpani, which establishes the galvanized rhythm of the brilliant finale.

### **Samuel Barber’s brilliant early career**

Barber’s early successes were legion. By the time he completed the Violin Concerto in 1939, he had already established a solid reputation with his Overture to *The School for Scandal* (1931), *Dover Beach* (1931), Sonata for Cello and Piano (1932), *Music for a Scene from Shelley* (1933), the ubiquitous Adagio for Strings (1936; originally part of his String Quartet), his First Symphony (in one movement, 1936), and First Essay for Orchestra (1937). The legendary Arturo Toscanini, who was not known for his interest in new music, let alone American music, became a proponent of Barber’s work. For a young man in his mid-20s, these were impressive achievements.

Barber went on to fulfill his early promise. Among other works, he completed several important operas, most notably *Vanessa* (1956) and *Antony and Cleopatra*, with which the new Metropolitan Opera at Lincoln Center opened in 1966. But nothing in his oeuvre apart from the Adagio has captured the popular imagination like the Violin Concerto. And no other American violin concerto has so entranced great violinists. What is it about this work that draws us back to it again and again?

### **Renaissance man from cultural royalty**

To better understand his Violin Concerto, we must consider Barber himself. Born into a stable upper-middle-class family, he pursued his formal musical education at the newly formed Curtis Institute of Music in Philadelphia. Barber was a renaissance man with a keen intellect. In addition to music, he cultivated interests in art and literature. He spoke French, German, Italian and Spanish with ease, and he read voraciously in all his languages. With respect to music, his persona was influenced substantially by his aunt and uncle, Louise and Sidney Homer. Louise was an important contralto, Sidney a respected composer of art songs. Barber was one of the few modern composers to receive formal training as a singer, and his sensitivity to vocal line is a defining aspect of his music, even the instrumental works.

### **First major commission**

He certainly brought this gift to the Violin Concerto. Its first two movements combine Brahmsian eloquence with Mendelssohnian melody; its perpetual motion finale is a dazzlingly difficult tour de force for the soloist. The concerto was Barber's first major commission. He undertook the work at the behest of Samuel Fels, a member of the Curtis Institute board and the owner of the Fels Naphtha soap fortune. Fels intended the concerto for his adopted son, Iso Briselli, a gifted young violinist.

Barber spent the summer of 1939 in Sils-Maria, Switzerland, completing the first two movements. With war imminent, American citizens were advised to leave Europe. Barber completed the concerto the following summer in Pocono Lake Preserve, Pennsylvania. When he presented Briselli with the finale, the violinist was dissatisfied. According to Barber biographer Barbara Heyman:

Many years later, Briselli offered [an] explanation in which he professed that although he

believed the first two movements of the concerto were beautiful and eagerly awaited the finale, he was disappointed with the third movement as “too lightweight” compared to the rest of the concerto. He suggested that the middle section be expanded to develop the movement into a sonata-rondo form, but Barber would not consider it.

Barber’s commission, the proceeds of which he had already spent in Europe, was briefly in question. Eventually, he and Fels negotiated a compromise whereby Barber would retain his fee and Briselli would forego his right to premiere the work. That honor went to Albert Spalding in February 1941.

In recent years, letters have surfaced that clarify Briselli’s position. Essentially he was uncomfortable with the stylistic shift between the first two movements and the finale. Regardless, there is no dispute today about the success of this concerto with violinists and with audiences.

### **In the composer’s words**

Barber wrote the following description of his Violin Concerto for the first performances.

It is lyric and rather intimate in character and a moderate-sized orchestra is used ... The first movement—*allegro molto moderato*—begins with a lyrical first subject announced at once by the solo violin, without any orchestral introduction. This movement as a whole has perhaps more the character of a sonata than concerto form. The second movement—*andante sostenuto*—is introduced by an extended oboe solo. The violin enters with a contrasting and rhapsodic theme, after which it repeats the oboe melody of the beginning. The last movement, a perpetual motion, exploits the more brilliant and virtuoso characteristics of the violin.

What he does not say is that his clear tonal language and unerring sense of drama make the Violin Concerto extraordinarily effective in performance. These are the factors that cause us to welcome its regular return to the concert hall.

*Instrumentation: for woodwinds, horns and trumpets in pairs; timpani; piano; strings and solo violin.*

*The third movement adds military drum.*

**TCHAIKOVSKY: Symphony No. 4 in F minor, Op. 36**

**Peter Ilich Tchaikovsky**

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

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

*Composed: from winter 1876 to January 1878*

*World premiere: February 22, 1878, in Moscow; Nikolai Rubinstein conducted.*

*NJSO premiere: 1932–33 season; Rene Pollain conducted.*

*Duration: 44 minutes*

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 von Meck for spiritual guidance, as confidant, as 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 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.” He calls the second theme group “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 it 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 140 years after it was first performed.

*Instrumentation: woodwinds in pairs plus piccolo, four horns, two trumpets, three trombones, bass tuba, timpani, triangle, cymbals, bass drum and strings.*