NEW JERSEY SYMPHONY ORCHESTRA
NJSO
XIAN ZHANG MUSIC DIRECTOR

NOTES ON THE PROGRAM

BY LAURIE SHULMAN, ©2016

Winter Festival: Zukerman Plays Tchaikovsky

ONE-MINUTE NOTES

TCHAIKOVSKY: "Mélodie" from *Souvenir d'un Lieu Cher*

Tchaikovsky's "Mélodie" from *Souvenir d'un lieu cher*, originally for violin and piano, is a rare example of his chamber music. We hear it here in Glazunov's arrangement for violin and orchestra. Sentimental and romantic, "Mélodie" is vintage Tchaikovsky.

TCHAIKOVSKY: *Sérénade Mélancolique*

Tchaikovsky's *Sérénade Mélancolique* is a concerto slow movement that stands alone. It showcases beautiful tone and expression, rather than bravura.

TCHAIKOVSKY: Serenade for Strings

In contrast to the *Sérénade Mélancolique*, Tchaikovsky's Serenade for Strings is sunny and exuberant: arguably the most enduring string orchestra work of the Romantic era. The composer was emulating Mozart's style, with a spacious four-movement layout. The slow introduction recurs in the finale.

MENDELSSOHN: Symphony No. 4, "Italian"

Mendelssohn's "Italian" Symphony captures aspects of Italian culture with consummate skill. Bright sunshine, a pilgrim's march and a lively *saltarello* are some of its highlights.

TCHAIKOVSKY: "Mélodie" from *Souvenir d'un Lieu Cher*, Op. 42

PYOTR ILYCH TCHAIKOVSKY

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

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

Composed: May and June 1878

World Premiere: Undocumented; probably at Mme von Meck's private residence in 1878

NJSO Premiere: These are the first NJSO performances.

Duration: 4 minutes

Tchaikovsky wrote little chamber music: three string quartets, a piano trio and the string sextet *Souvenir de Florence*. The violin/piano duos known as *Souvenir d'un Lieu Cher* (*Remembrance of a Special Place*) are his only other music for small ensemble.

These three pieces are actually reminiscent of the 19th-century salon tradition. They are closely linked to the history of Tchaikovsky's Violin Concerto and the emotionally fraught year that followed his disastrous marriage in July 1877. After an emotional breakdown, he took refuge in travel and wandered through Europe for several months. Early in 1878, he settled for a while in the Swiss village of Clarens, a resort on the north shore of Lake Geneva that was popular with Russians.

He soon had a visitor from Berlin—the Russian violinist Josef Kotek, who was studying with Joseph Joachim in the German capital. Kotek brought with him several new scores, including Édouard Lalo's new *Symphonie espagnole* for violin and orchestra. Tchaikovsky's imagination was fired, and within weeks he had completed full sketches for his own violin concerto. The original slow movement did not fully satisfy him, however, and he set it aside, composing a new central movement for the concerto, the familiar Canzonetta. He would find a use for the rejected movement within months.

Later that spring, Tchaikovsky was still procrastinating a return to his family seat in Russia and the prospect of dealing with his estranged bride. In spring 1878, Tchaikovsky's patroness Nadezhda von

Meck invited him to stay at her country estate at Brailovo in the Ukraine for a couple of weeks. She and her entourage would not be in residence, and her staff could attend to his needs.

Tchaikovsky accepted with gratitude. Upon his arrival in late May, he discovered that in addition to a palatial house, a carriage and several servants, he had at his disposal an excellent library and several fine instruments. Aware that he could only repay von Meck's generosity through his talent, he decided to leave her a musical gift to thank her for her hospitality. She was fond of violin music, so he salvaged a discarded movement from his violin concerto, renaming it *Méditation.* Then he composed two new movements, a Scherzo and the "Mélodie". When he departed Brailovo in mid-June, he left the manuscript with the estate's steward. The pieces were published in May 1879 with the dedication "To B------"—Brailovo, the beloved place of the title.

"Mélodie" is vintage Tchaikovsky: heart-on-the-sleeve sentimental, the essence of romanticism. It has become a popular encore piece independent of *Souvenir d'un Lieu Cher*, and it makes an equally satisfying introductory movement to this weekend's all-Tchaikovsky first half.

Instrumentation: Alexander Glazunov's 1896 orchestration calls for woodwinds and horns in pairs, strings and solo violin.

TCHAIKOVSKY: *Sérénade Mélancolique*, Op. 26

PYOTR ILYCH TCHAIKOVSKY

Composed: January–February 1875

World Premiere: January 28, 1876, in Moscow

NJSO Premiere: These are the first NJSO performances.

Duration: 7 minutes

At the recommendation of the pianist and composer Anton Rubinstein, the Hungarian violinist Leopold Auer (1845–1930) succeeded Henry Wieniawski as professor of violin at the St. Petersburg

Conservatory in 1868. Auer would remain in Russia for half a century, exercising a profound influence on the Russian violin school and moving in the most elite musical circles. Tchaikovsky met Auer and heard him play at Rubinstein's house in January 1875, while the composer was working on his First Piano Concerto. Thrilled with Auer's musicianship, he began thinking about composing concerted works for violin and orchestra. Within a month, he had completed the first such piece: the *Sérénade Mélancolique*, which he dedicated to his new colleague.

The *Sérénade* is analogous to the Beethoven Romances for violin and orchestra: a concerto slow movement that stands alone. In this case, the piece is more closely linked to Tchaikovsky's First Piano Concerto than to his Violin Concerto of 1878. It shares the tonality of B-flat minor/D-flat major with the piano concerto, and critics have often noted the psychological relationship of the *Sérénade* to the slow movement of the keyboard work. A mournful main theme delivers the melancholy of the *Sérénade*'s subtitle. The tempo picks up in the contrasting central section, which includes a duet between violin and horn, with attractive supporting roles for oboe and clarinet as well. The English musicologist Gerald Abraham described the *Sérénade* as "highly characteristic of Tchaikovsky's art in that vein of mingled sadness and graciousness in which he excelled when he felt things profoundly without being in too emotionally self-indulgent a mood."

The *Sérénade* is a showpiece for individualism and expression, rather than bravura. Although it has never approached the cult status that the later Violin Concerto eventually achieved, it was a key work in establishing Tchaikovsky's reputation abroad. It became a particular favorite in Paris. Encouraged by its success, the composer wrote two similar single movement works: the *Valse-scherzo*, Op. 34, for violin and orchestra (1877) and, much later, the *Pezzo capriccioso,* Op. 62, for cello and orchestra (1887).

Instrumentation: woodwinds in pairs, four horns, strings and solo violin.

TCHAIKOVSKY: Serenade for Strings, Op. 48

PYOTR ILICH TCHAIKOVSKY

Composed: September–October 1880

World Premiere: October 30, 1881, in St. Petersburg

NJSO Premiere: 1962–63 season; Kenneth Schermerhorn conducted.

Duration: 29 minutes

In October 1880, Tchaikovsky wrote to his patroness, Nadejhda von Meck: "My muse has been so kind that in a short time I have got through two long works: a big festival overture for the Exhibition, and a serenade for string orchestra in four movements. I am busy orchestrating them both."

The first piece was the bombastic *1812 Overture*; the second was the delightful serenade we hear this weekend. It is difficult to imagine two works further apart in spirit.

The composer's letters make it clear that he focused his creative energy on the Serenade. He had composed the overture tongue-in-cheek and knew that his reputation would gain far more from the Serenade. To his publisher, Peter Ivanovich Jürgenson, he wrote: "I am violently in love with this work and can't wait for it to be played." Tchaikovsky's original conception was midway between symphony and string quartet or quintet—but he specified in the score that he wanted the largest number of strings possible.

Live performance restores the music's freshness. We are reminded why this piece entered the repertoire immediately upon its premiere and has retained considerable popularity. Even Anton Rubinstein, Tchaikovsky's former teacher and severest critic, came to like the Serenade.

Straightforward and sunny in temperament, the Serenade overflows with memorable melodies in all four movements, with strong thematic connections between the first and the last movements. Descending and ascending scale patterns figure prominently in its themes, and more than one Russian

folk melody is incorporated into its fabric. Frequent double-stopping in the strings contributes to the lushness of the Serenade's sound; Tchaikovsky counters this in places with doubled parts, thereby reducing the number of polyphonic lines. His string writing throughout is masterly, making the Serenade one of his finest compositions between 1878 and 1885. No other 19th-century work for strings alone has become so firmly entrenched in the permanent repertoire.

All four sections of the Serenade have their special moments. The first movement, which bears the subtitle "Piece in the form of a sonatina," is framed by a rich, grand slow introduction that returns at the end after a lively middle section whose length—the movement takes 10 minutes—belies the "sonatina" of the subtitle. Tchaikovsky's second-movement Valse is a delightful reminder of his brilliant gift for ballet music; at the same time, darker moments in the middle section call to mind the weightier, metaphysical waltzes of Chopin and Brahms.

Tchaikovsky's Elegy recaptures some of the grandeur of the slow introduction; his finale is pure Russian folk music, with the subtitle "Tema Russo" attached to the first part and the spirit of balalaika dancing driving the pace of the Allegro con spirito.

Instrumentation: strings.

MENDELSSOHN: Symphony No. 4 in A Major, Op. 90 ("Italian")

Felix Mendelssohn

Born: *February 3, 1809, in Hamburg, Germany*

Died: *November 4, 1847, in Leipzig, Germany*

Composed: *1831–33; revised 1834 and continuously through the composer's death.*

World Premiere: *London, 13 May 1833. The composer conducted the Philharmonic Society.*

NJSO Premiere: *1939–40 season; Frieder Weissmann conducted.*

Duration: *26 minutes*

Writing to his sisters from Italy in 1831, 22-year-old Felix Mendelssohn described his new symphony as "the liveliest thing I have yet done, especially the last movement." Ironically, the last movement that so pleased him in the "Italian" Symphony's early stages proved to be a stumbling block. Mendelssohn was never entirely satisfied with the finale, and he withheld the symphony from publication during his lifetime. How difficult for 21st-century listeners to understand, as perfect a jewel as this beloved symphony seems! From the opening woodwind chirping and the lilt of the first string theme, the "Italian" Symphony sweeps us willingly along in its joyous burble, a mountain brook with gleaming sunlight dappling in endless variety upon its surface.

Brilliantly orchestrated, the "Italian" symphony is the work of a master. It hardly seems possible that a young man in his early 20s could have composed it. So closely knit are its four movements that it almost seems unjust to single any of them out. But Mendelssohn, the classicist who also successfully embraced the romantic concept of program music, captured several aspects of Italian culture with consummate skill.

Because of its walking bass, Mendelssohn's slow movement has been variously likened to a procession of pilgrims such as he would have seen on the roads around Naples, or perhaps a group of monks methodically going about their tasks on foot. If less explicitly pictorial, the third movement is surely one of the most melodious creations in all the romantic literature, scored with exquisite delicacy; the

trio section, with its hunting motif for horns and bassoons, recalls the magical world of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*.

The finale that so frustrated Mendelssohn is a *saltarello*. This energetic and lively medieval dance remained popular well into the 19th century. Mendelssohn's genius lies in setting it in minor mode. That imaginative stroke is one of the traits that sets this beloved symphony among the masterworks.

Instrumentation: woodwinds, horns and trumpets in pairs; timpani and strings.