



Gustav Meier
Music Director
63rd Season
4th Subscription Concert
Klein Memorial Auditorium
Saturday, March 14, 2009
8:00 p.m.

Gustav Meier, Conductor

J. STRAUSS Kaiser - Walzer (Emperor Waltzes), op. 437

R. STRAUSS Der Rosenkavalier Suite

INTERMISSION

TCHAIKOVSKY Symphony no. 4 in F minor, op. 36
Andante sostenuto - moderato con anima
Andantino in modo di canzona
Scherzo (pizzicato ostinato)
Finale: allegro con fuoco

*Tonight's concert is made possible in part by generous grants from the
Connecticut Commission on Culture & Tourism and WSHU Public Radio Group.*

PROGRAM NOTES

Billed as “A Night of Passion” in GBSO brochures this season, tonight’s concert features the orchestra alone, without soloists, performing ‘glamour’ scores from the late Romantic period. First appearing within a narrow time span of 33 years (1878 - 1911), the three works all use the splendor symphonic ensembles had achieved by that time in respect to size (the Strauss score called for 112 musicians in an opera house!), instrumental flexibility (brass and woodwinds were all valved, making them completely chromatic), and timbre (construction advances enhanced strength and tone color). Further, combining the elements of music had become more expansive; harmony was at its richest level ever, melodies covered their longest time span and rhythm was more intricate. Form wise, tonight’s program favors the waltz, certainly the principle ‘dance of passion’ from the early nineteenth to the early twentieth centuries.

The name waltz comes from the Latin *volvere* - ‘to rotate, to roll, to turn.’ The evolution of the dance was gradual, but Vienna is its city of origin and an Austro/German peasant dance common there, the *ländler*, a probable precursor. This countryside dance had three even beats and was done by couples. Accent the first beat, slightly anticipate the second and lighten the third and a waltz is possible, the rhythmic subtleties of which only a “born and bred Viennese” can properly do, natives feel. Vienna itself was always a melting pot where North German seriousness, Italian sunniness, Hungarian volatility and many other influences coalesced. The city’s “astonishing ability to live with and survive disaster attracted people from everywhere” (Wechsberg: *The Waltz Emperors*.) The waltz as a dance expressed this collective soul in all its ramifications (and by extension eventually that of other Western societies as well.) Many balls were open to all classes of people and the art critic Hans Tietze once wrote, “the secret of the Viennese waltz is in resolving all the oppressive, doubtful elements of the Viennese character into art in a pure, expressive form.”

At first mainly an entertainment for lower class couples, “word soon got around among the blasé aristocrats that the waltz was a very erotic dance. On the large estates, some noblemen began slipping away to the balls of their servants” (Wechsberg). The closeness of the couples and the dizzy whirl of their turns got the waltz banned in some places. The young were drawn to it - shades of modern rock and roll!

But Johann Strauss “understood human beings; he was able to translate their most intimate feelings into melody” (Wechsberg) and his later waltzes became symphonic poems of timeless style and taste. For Richard Strauss (no relation) the waltz was the perfect medium for his opera, *Der Rosenkavalier*, with its “evocation of an unrealistic, fairy-story Vienna of long ago” (Harewood: *Kobbe’s Opera Book*), even though there were no waltzes there in Maria Theresa’s time, its setting (1740 -1780). Nor was Tchaikovsky’s love for the waltz strange, given his knowledge of and experience in the West at a time when Russia’s aristocrats were drawn to Italian, Austrian and French manners and art. For him its gracefulness and elegance were a perfect frame for the emotional drama that always dominates in his music.

Kaiser-Walzer, op. 437 Johann Strauss Jr. (1825-1899) (Emperor Waltzes)

In the mid-19th century reign of Vienna as the “Imperial City”, the Strauss family employed as many as 200 people to meet the demands of all the extravagant public and private dance parties. When Johann, Jr. took up his violin to lead the orchestra, “all eyes were turned on him; it was a moment of worship” (Wechsberg), even a kind of mass hypnosis. The “desert storm of his waltz” rode on top of all the possible vicissitudes of fortune that might actually be happening (and many were - military campaigns, financial panics and the like.) Strauss said he owed his talent to his native city “where the sounds are in the air that I heard in my ears, took in with my heart and wrote down with my hand.”

1888 was the 40th anniversary of the then 58-year old Emperor Franz Joseph I's ascension to the Austro-Hungarian throne at 18. His father had abdicated in 1848, a year of Revolution in Europe. At the time Johann Jr. and his brother, Josef, were sympathetic to the Revolutionaries, while their own father, founder of the Strauss dynasty had sided with the regime. Franz Joseph ruled for 66 years, but by his death in 1916 World War I was raging and with it the end of his monarchy was 2 years away - all of this being in fact major historical change. The Emperor was an admired, but somewhat remote, figure and Strauss wrote the "quintessence of his devotion, sympathy and sadness for him into the *Emperor Waltzes* (Wechsberg.) "Poetically and prophetically in haunting undertones," he achieved a sense of past and future. The introduction is formal and gentle with some sense of the quaintness of long ago. The waltzes have their regal, joyous and sensuous moments, but the coda again "looks back and pays homage to the lonely man in the Hofburg" (Wechsberg.) The publisher, Simrock, had suggested a waltz for the German Kaiser Wilhelm, but it is clear that Strauss meant his own Austrian Emperor.

Der Rosenkavalier Suite Richard Strauss (1864-1949)

The plot of *Der Rosenkavalier* concerns a Marschallin (Field Marshall's wife) who is old enough (about 32 Strauss says) to begin brooding over her fading youth, but still able to attract the attention of a seventeen year old, Count Octavian Rofrano. When the youth disguises himself as a maid to avoid discovery by the unexpected arrival at their morning tryst of the Marschallin's prying cousin, Baron Ochs, an aging roué (but one with some country manners, Strauss asks), the Baron flirts with 'her'. He has made an offer of marriage to Sophie the beautiful young daughter of a *nouveau riche* family. Her father is impressed that his child will gain a title. Octavian (not in disguise) is sent to present a silver rose to the maiden. Of course the two young people fall in love and the rest of the opera is the working out of their liaison which the Marschallin resignedly facilitates while the Baron is put in compromising and highly comic situations.

A précis of the plot doesn't make clear the expertness with which the librettist, Hugo von Hofmannsthal, fashioned this original tale for and with Strauss. Their cordial collaboration on many scores is one of the few on a level with that of daPonte and Mozart or Boito and Verdi in the annals of opera. "One of (its) finest fruits is a fast moving musical conversation, always apt to situation, full of characters, a unique example of speech heightened by music" (Kobbe/Harewood). In the final trio, the three principals, the Marschallin, Octavian and Sophie, sing alone on the stage each to himself or herself. The Marschallin, "I vowed to myself to cherish him (Octavian) in the right way, that I would even love his love for another woman": Octavian, "something has happened. I want to ask her (the Marschallin); dare it be? and just that question, I feel is forbidden": and Sophie "I want to kneel down before the lady (the Marschallin)... because I sense that she gives him to me." The threads of the tale come together here in some of the most opulent, yet apt, music and words ever written for an opera.

The orchestral *Suite* Strauss made from the score includes the Introduction, the presentation of the rose, the second Act duet of Sophie and Octavian, the waltz music, the final trio and concluding love duet. Strauss was a master orchestrator and here his inspiration was equal to his facility. The waltzes themselves are of a haunting richness: the era of Johann Strauss was over and only at such a point in time can distance lend its enchantment. The disruptions that led to the First World War were already present in 1911. They stood in sharp contrast to the intent of the score.

Symphony no. 4 in F minor, op.36 Peter Ilyich Tchaikovsky (1830-1893)

Tchaikovsky handled large forms best when the emotional impact of his ideas was so strong that it dictated the structure through which it moved. The *Symphony no 4*, first of his last great triumverate, was one such success. In it he made Fate an implacable interrupter of human happiness and placed beside it more positive images without reconciling the two.

Writing to his patroness, Nadezhda von Meck, Tchaikovsky said “the Introduction is the germ of the entire *Symphony*. Fate, unconquerable, inescapable...despair and discontent grow stronger...a tender dream is only a dream and Fate wakes us. So life is a persistent alteration of hard reality with evanescent dreams and clutchings at happiness.

“The second movement expresses another phase of depression. It is the melancholy that comes in the evening when we sit alone, and weary of work, having picked up a book, but let it fall from our hands. There were happy moments...there were gloomy moments too. And it is sad and somehow sweet to bury oneself in the past.

“The third movement does not express any definite sensations. It consists of capricious arabesques that pass through the imagination when one has drunk a little wine. The imagination is liberated. One remembers a roistering peasant and a street song. In the distance a military parade passes. These are disconnected images. They have nothing to do with reality and are strange, wild and incoherent.

“The Fourth movement. If you cannot find reasons for happiness in yourself, look at others. Get out among the people. See what a good time they have, surrendering themselves to joyous feelings. Fate appears once more and reminds you of its presence, but to others you are of no concern...Reproach yourself and do not say all the world is sad. Simple but strong joys do exist.”

He warned Nadezhda that he was attempting to “put this program into words only in general terms: I was in terribly low spirits last winter while I was writing this symphony and it is a true echo of my feelings at the time...I have already forgotten a lot.” Fate itself is heard as a stern brass fanfare which opens the work. The first movement proper starts with a hesitant waltz theme, the first of the “futile yearnings” that seek to bypass it. Subsidiary themes are also waltz-like and move through many keys before the Fate theme recurs. Overall a “large and brooding” movement which contains the “burden of the work’s musical and extra-musical arguments” (Steinberg: *The Symphony*.) In the second movement the melancholy

opening oboe tune is “an apt musical image of the weary mind wandering,” while in the third the pizzicato (plucked) strings used to suggest darting, unconnected images are a *tour de force* of writing. The woodwind/brass contrasting section is in the same vein. The last movement is based on a lively Russian folk song and opens with a high-energy orchestral flourish. The Fate theme returns before the end, after which “the symphony is free to rush to its emphatic conclusion which beats all records for the number of cymbal crashes per minute” (Steinberg).

Nadezhda von Meck herself was an energetic woman who masterminded her husband’s rise to fortune as a railroad magnate. After his death she became Tchaikovsky’s ‘beloved friend’ in one of music history’s stranger, but extremely nurturing relationships. They agreed to never meet, although her children knew him and her daughter, Anna, married one of his nephews. For fourteen years she helped him financially and encouraged him. Their letters, dominated by his careful answers to her questions and comments, are important documentation of the Romantic sensibility at work. The dedication to her of the *Fourth* as ‘our’ *Symphony* was recognition of her position as artistic confidant sensitive on the whole to the bounds his emotional needs could accept. “How happy I am,” she wrote to him of the dedication, “to have found in you the perfect corroboration of my ideal of a composer.”

Tchaikovsky was first of all a musician, professional in every way, and a steady and tireless worker who was aware of the logical and inspirational possibilities of his day. Around the time he was starting the *Fourth Symphony*, he undertook a disastrous marriage. This attempt to disguise his homosexuality (which, however, otherwise he accepted) resulted in an attempt at suicide and a serious breakdown. The support of his brothers and of Nadezhda von Meck helped him recover. The *Fifth* and *Sixth Symphonies*, *Sleeping Beauty* and *Nutcracker Ballets*, among other works would not now exist if the outcome had been otherwise.

-Burton Hatheway