



Gustav Meier
Music Director
64th Season
2nd Subscription Concert
Klein Memorial Auditorium
Saturday, November 14, 2009
8:00 p.m.

Gustav Meier, Conductor
Alexander Beyer, Piano

- TCHAIKOVSKY Polonaise from Eugene Onegin
- TCHAIKOVSKY Piano Concerto no.1, op. 23
Allegro non troppo- allegro con spirito
Andantino semplice - prestissimo
Allegro con fuoco
Alexander Beyer, Piano

Intermission

- RACHMANINOFF Vocalize, op. 34, no. 14
- STRAVINSKY Firebird Suite
Introduction
Dance of the Firebird
Round Dance of the Princesses
Infernal Dance of King Kashchei
Berceuse
Finale

The Greater Bridgeport Symphony mourns the passing of Kurt Hersher, a devoted Board member and generous benefactor. Kurt Hersher made it possible for many gifted young artists to excel and achieve their dreams, and tonight's performance is dedicated in his memory.

Tonight's concert is made possible in part by a generous grant from the Connecticut Commission on Culture & Tourism.

Please be courteous by turning off your cell phones and remember the use of photographic equipment or recording devices is strictly prohibited.

PROGRAM NOTES

Icons all, the four works on tonight's program have long since achieved repertoire status. The Tchaikovsky *Polonaise* from *Eugene Onegin* is probably the greatest concert example of this dance ever written, always excepting the varied group Chopin composed for piano solo which are in a class by themselves. The Tchaikovsky *Piano Concerto no. 1* is high on any list of 19th-century warhorses for that instrument. The Rachmaninoff *Vocalize* shares top honors with Villa-Lobos's *Bachiana Brasileira no. 5* as the greatest piece for intoned voice (i. e. without words) composed to the present time and the *Firebird Ballet* score made the 28 year-old Stravinsky an overnight sensation as a new composer on the world scene at its 1910 premiere in Paris. Not surprising that all these works were picked for a concert billed as 'Russian Roulette'.

The development of Russian music into a national style less dependent on European models was on a fast track from the time of Glinka (d. 1857) through the rest of the 19th century. Characteristic were native dance forms, folk melodies, orientalisms, vastly increased orchestral color and emotional hyperbole. Tchaikovsky had been born into a Russia without any formal music school until 1862 when at 22 he became one of the first students at the new St. Petersburg Conservatory and later at a similar institution in Moscow. There he absorbed the international style combining German logic with Italian songfulness which had taken hold of Europe in the late 18th and early 19th century, whereas Glinka had had to go to Italy for a similar education and then intuit his way to a more 'Russian' mix. Tchaikovsky never lost his Western grounding, coloring it with ethnic traits that were becoming typical and more specialized in national schools of the late 19th century. A hard worker, he was the most self-confessional of the Romantics, prizing immediacy and spontaneity as inspiration. The

New Groves Dictionary's statement that he "dominates 19th century Russian music as its greatest talent" is reflective of his current historical place: one cannot argue with great melodic gifts.

Rachmaninoff, too, could be educated at still-functioning Czarist institutions. He entered the Moscow Conservatory at 12 where Tchaikovsky became an early champion and mentor for him - a kind of passing on of the torch. His triple career as composer, pianist and conductor, at all of which he excelled, earned him an eventual place as the musical world's "most effective anti-modernist standard bearer because he seemed to be the only one capable of successfully maintaining the prestigious style of the 19th century classics into the 20th century (Taruskin, *Oxford History of Western Music*).

Stravinsky, on the other hand, faced the upheavals beginning in 1902 that led to the Communist Revolution of 1917 while barely out of his teens. Tchaikovsky had died before active rebellion started; Rachmaninoff was 45 when he finally left the country, but Stravinsky, no less Russian than the others, was only 28 when he first went to

Paris, staying in Switzerland in the First World War, becoming a French national in the 1920s, coming to New York in 1939 and taking American citizenship in 1945. Stravinsky's development as a composer and musician was very gradual: piano lessons, first attempts at composition, accompanying a children's choir started the process. His friendship with Rimsky-Korsakoff's son, a fellow law student, was fortuitous. Rimsky, a seminal figure in modern orchestration and composer of the glorious *Scheherazade*, recognized Stravinsky's talent and became his advisor and teacher: his education remained in the hands of private tutors. His achievement is central to the modern period. Starting from the

resources of the large late-romantic orchestra, he developed many of the 20th century's most salient features; use of rhythm as a melodic building block, exploitation of primitive subject matter, investing idioms of the past with a new athleticism and the like.

POLONAISE FROM EUGENE ONEGIN
Peter Ilyich Tchaikovsky
(1840 - 1893)

The libretto for Tchaikovsky's opera, *Eugene Onegin*, comes from revered Russian poet Alexander Pushkin's verse novel of the same name. Called by many "the supreme masterpiece of Russian literature," Tchaikovsky fashioned much of the libretto himself, no mean feat. "If ever music was written with love for the story and the characters in it, it is the music for *Onegin*, he wrote. I trembled and melted with inexpressible delight while writing it." Involving types of people and situations he knew first hand from experience, he found in this plot "a painful longing for an ideal never realized" (Poznansky, *Tchaikovsky*).

Onegin, a man-about-town from the capital is visiting a country estate with a friend, Lensky, who is visiting his fiance, Olga. Tatiana, Olga's romantic, more complicated sister, is smitten with Onegin and innocently writes him an ardent letter. Onegin dismisses her rather off-handedly, and provokes a duel with his friend by flirting with Olga. Lensky is killed. Several years later, Tatiana has married a virtuous, but comparatively plain, older aristocrat and is reigning as Princess in his St. Petersburg home. Onegin, who had left the country, returns and realizes he has loved Tatiana all along. She now rejects him out of respect for her husband: it is Onegin's turn to be left in despair.

The *Polonaise* excerpted this evening from the Act III ball at the Prince's townhouse is elegance and splendor itself. Its verve and nobility fit the situation exactly, although a few quiet phrases before the final section are thoughtful and inward-looking.

PIANO CONCERTO NO 1, OP. 23

Tchaikovsky

"Here," Tchaikovsky wrote of piano concertos, "we are dealing with two equal opponents: the orchestra with its power and inexhaustible variety of color, opposed by the small but highly-mettled piano, which often comes off victorious in the hands of a gifted executant." His *Piano Concerto no. 1* written in 1875 proves this observation. Yet Nicholas Rubinstein, founder and director of the Moscow Conservatory where by this time Tchaikovsky was a teacher of composition, found the work "bad, trivial and a series of stolen ideas" when the composer took it to him for advice about the solo part. The composer was "speechless with excitement and fury" when he heard this "torrent of words in the tone of Jupiter, master of the thunderbolts." He had not been prepared to be treated as "a worthless writer who had come to annoy a famous musician with his rubbish." Rubinstein later changed his mind, but would not give the first performance - and Tchaikovsky didn't change a note.

The *Concerto* begins with what is surely one of the 10 best known classical melodies. Presented prodigally in grand and sensuous dress and then heard no more, it is a fitting portal to what follows: its majesty probably left nothing more to be said. The movement proper then introduces several ideas; a jaunty, but restless, folk tune Tchaikovsky heard blind beggars sing at a village fair in the Ukraine followed by more tranquil themes, full of the longing and yearning sentiment the romantics expressed so well. These themes are developed with a sure dramatic hand and this movement constitutes more than half the work.

The second movement opens with a melody of haunting simplicity. A playful, whimsical scherzo, based on a charming French waltz tune which Tchaikovsky and his brothers had admired as children, is a contrasting middle section. The last movement pairs a vigorous Ukrainian dance tune with a tender song-like idea. Exacting passage work in octaves from the soloist leads to the transformation of this quiet idea into a rich, lyric paean near the end. Tchaikovsky may have

seen the concerto form as a kind of duel between equals, but the two here have in common the wonderful melodies, always a Tchaikovsky strong point.

VOCALIZE, OP. 34 NO. 14

Sergei Rachmaninoff (1873 - 1943)

In picking texts for his 71 songs, Rachmaninoff wrote "the mood of a poem should be rather sad than gay. Light colors do not come easily to me." *Vocalize*, last of his 14 Songs, op.34, is elegaic, but sensuous at the same time. Its long-breathed melody is supported by an intricate accompaniment of suspensions and 7th chords. The composer made this transcription for orchestra alone. It is a stunning piece of quiet music no matter how it is arranged - and there are many versions extant.

FIREBIRD SUITE

Igor Stravinsky (1882 - 1971)

Serge Diaghilev, an "impresario of genius" (Schouvaloff, *The Art of the Ballet Russes*) and founder of the Ballet Russes, heard enormous promise in a performance of the young Stravinsky's *Scherzo Fantastique* at a 1909 St. Petersburg concert. Diaghilev's goal in founding the Ballet was "showing Russian art to the West" using Paris as his main performance venue. He always "began with the composer" and, wishing to present a "purely Russian work," he offered Stravinsky the commission for the score to *The Firebird* within a few months of the concert - the beginning of one of the greatest collaborations in the annals of dance.

The intention was to give a Russian fairy tale for children more adult significance. The ogre Kashchei is the embodiment of evil, while the Firebird is a force for good, a "gorgeous, yet enigmatic, thing of preternatural, elemental freedom, personifying the indifference of beauty to the desires and cares of mankind" (Walsh, *Stravinsky; A Creative Spring*). Kashchei has a garden where men who enter are turned to stone and maidens are held captive. He is immortal as long as his soul remains intact in a casket where it is preserved in the form of an egg. A young Prince, Ivan Tsarevitch - the archetypal Imperial Russian hero figure, wanders into Kashchei's garden in pursuit of the

Firebird, catches her and after taking a feather in forfeit, lets her go. Watching the captive maidens dance, he falls in love with one of them and is then himself captured by Kashchei's monsters. He waves the Firebird's feather which calls her back. She tells the Prince about the ogre's soul. He breaks the egg, Kashchei dies and the captives are freed. Ivan is then betrothed to the maiden he loves.

This scenario was worked out in great detail by Diaghilev, Benois (stage designer) and Fokine (choreographer) and presented to Stravinsky who suggested the final transformation and coronation scene. The score has "glittering orchestration" and shows an "astonishing mastery of resource and technique" (Walsh). The music is harmonically and rhythmically complex for the elusive Firebird and the monster, Kashchei, who inhabit a world of mystery. It is more simple for Ivan and the 'real' world. The Firebird was a *succès fou* at its first performance in 1910. The impression of that Parisian audience was that it had witnessed "the integration of music, dance and design into what critic Henri Ghéon called the most exquisite marvel of equilibrium that we ever imagined between sounds, movements and forms" (Walsh).

While any battles for recognition of the works this evening are long since over, this was not always so. Of the first performance of Tchaikovsky's *Concerto* in Boston on October 25, 1875, it was said by critics, "there were long stretches of formless void, sprinkled only with tinklings of the piano" and "could we ever learn to love this extremely difficult, strange, wild, ultra modern Russian Concerto?" On November 13th that year a critic in St. Petersburg wrote, "Tchaikovsky's First Piano Concerto, like the first pancake, is a flop." In St. Petersburg, *The Firebird* brought comments like "horrifying poverty of melodic invention, a lot of notes but not much music" and "risks losing his way in Kashchei's magic garden." Or in another article, "Stravinsky's dissonances quickly become wearying because there are no ideas behind them."

Burton Hatheway