

## PROGRAM NOTES

by Phillip Huscher

### **Piotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky**

Born May 7, 1840, Votkinsk, Russia.

Died November 6, 1893, Saint Petersburg, Russia.

### **Violin Concerto in D Major, Op. 35**

Tchaikovsky began his violin concerto in March 1878 and completed it on April 11. The first performance was given on December 4, 1881, in Vienna. The orchestra consists of two flutes, two oboes, two clarinets, two bassoons, four horns, two trumpets, timpani, and strings. Performance time is approximately thirty-four minutes.

The Chicago Symphony Orchestra's first subscription concert performances of Tchaikovsky's Violin Concerto were given at the Auditorium Theatre on December 8 and 9, 1899, with Alexandre Petschnikoff as soloist and Theodore Thomas conducting. Our most recent subscription concert performances were given at Orchestra Hall on April 20, 21, 22, 23, and 25, 2006, with Joshua Bell as soloist and David Zinman conducting. The Orchestra first performed this concerto at the Ravinia Festival on July 17, 1937, with Mischa Mischakoff as soloist and Hans Kindler conducting, and most recently on July 12, 2009, with Miriam Fried as soloist and James Conlon conducting.

This violin concerto was the best thing to come of a very bad marriage. In May 1877, Tchaikovsky received a letter from Antonina Milyukova, a former student he couldn't remember, who said she was madly in love with him. Earlier that year, Tchaikovsky had entered into an extraordinary relationship, conducted entirely by correspondence, with Nadezhda von Meck, and he found this combination of intellectual intimacy and physical distance ideal. In order to keep his homosexuality from the public, he impulsively seized on the convenient, though unpromising, idea of marriage to a woman he didn't even know. On June 1, Tchaikovsky visited Antonina Milyukova for the first time; a day or two later he proposed.

The marriage lasted less than three months, but it must have seemed a lifetime. Tchaikovsky quickly learned to despise Antonina—he couldn't even bring himself to introduce her as his wife—and he was shocked to learn that she knew not one note of music. In September, he botched a pathetic suicide attempt—he waded into the freezing Moscow River hoping to contract a fatal chill—and then fled to Saint Petersburg. On October 13, Anatoly, the composer's brother, took Tchaikovsky on an extended trip to Europe. His thoughts quickly turned to composing, confirming what he wrote to Nadezhda von Meck during the very worst days: "My heart is full. It thirsts to pour itself out in music." He returned to composition cautiously, beginning with the works that had been interrupted by the unfortunate encounter with Antonina: he completed the Fourth Symphony in January 1878 and finished *Eugene Onegin* the next month.

By March, he had recovered his old strength; he settled briefly in Clarens, Switzerland, and there in the span of eleven days he sketched a new work, a violin concerto in D major; he completed the scoring two weeks later. When he returned to Russia in late April, there were still lingering difficulties—Antonina alternately accepted and rejected the divorce papers, and even extracted the supreme revenge of moving into the apartment above his—but the worst year of his life was over.

The Violin Concerto was launched by a visit to Clarens from Tchaikovsky's student and friend—and possible lover—the violinist Yosif Kotek, who arrived at Tchaikovsky's door with a suitcase full of music. (Kotek had been a witness at Tchaikovsky's wedding.) The next day they played through Lalo's *Symphonie espagnol*, and Tchaikovsky was immediately taken with the idea of writing a large work for violin and orchestra. He liked the way that Lalo "does not strive after profundity, but carefully avoids routine, seeks out new forms, and thinks more about musical beauty than about observing established traditions, as do the Germans." He plunged in at once, and found to his delight that music came to him easily. (Shortly after he arrived in Clarens, he had begun a piano sonata, but it didn't go well and he quickly gave it up.) Each day Kotek offered advice on violinistic matters, and he learned the score page by page as Tchaikovsky wrote it. On April 1, when the work was completely sketched, they played through the concerto for the composer's other brother, Modest. Both Yosif and Modest thought the slow movement was weak. Four days later, Tchaikovsky wrote a new one (the original Andante became the Meditation from *Souvenir d'un lieu cher*), immediately began scoring the work, and unveiled the finished product on April 11. Clearly he was back on track.

New problems awaited Tchaikovsky, however. Although the concerto was dedicated to the great violinist Leopold Auer, and the premiere was already advertised for the following March 22, Auer stunned the composer by dismissing the piece as unplayable. Tchaikovsky was deeply wounded, and the premiere was postponed indefinitely. "Coming from such an authority," Tchaikovsky said, Auer's rejection "had the effect of casting this unfortunate child of my imagination into the limbo of the hopelessly forgotten."

Two years passed. Then one day Tchaikovsky's publisher informed him that Adolf Brodsky, a young violinist, had learned the concerto and persuaded Hans Richter and the Vienna Philharmonic to play it in concert. That performance, in December 1881, was no doubt horrible, for the orchestra, underrehearsed and reading from parts chock full of mistakes, played pianissimo throughout, to avert disaster. Reviewing the concerto, the often ill-tempered critic Eduard Hanslick wrote that, for the first time, he realized that there was music "whose stink one can hear." Tchaikovsky never got over that review, and, for the rest of his life, it is said, he could quote it by heart. Although Hanslick stood by his opinion, Auer later admitted that the concerto was merely difficult, not unplayable, and he taught it to his students, including Mischa Elman and Jascha Heifetz, who have since played it in Chicago.

Hanslick's dislike is hard to understand, for this is hardly an inflated, pretentious, and vulgar work, although those are the words he used. In fact, Tchaikovsky's lyric gift has seldom seemed so natural, flowing effortlessly through all three movements. If there's any deficiency here, it's one of form and construction, not content; even the most casual listener may find it disconcerting that—as with the popular "Tonight We Love" tune in the B-flat piano concerto—the lovely theme with which Tchaikovsky begins vanishes into thin air after a few seconds, never to return.

Hanslick also took offense at the demanding, virtuosic solo part, writing in terms that crop up in reviews of new music to this day: "The violin is no longer played; it is pulled about, torn, beaten black and blue."

What Hanslick failed to notice is the way Tchaikovsky has taken care to cushion even the most challenging, exhibitionistic passages in music of unforced lyricism and restraint. Even Hanslick admitted that the lovely slow movement made progress in winning him over. But the brilliant finale, with its driving, folklike melodies and very "Russian" second theme over the low bagpipe drone of open fifths, was too much for him, and he concluded sputtering about wretched Russian holidays and the smell of vodka. Even Auer had to admit that Hanslick's comment "did credit neither to his good judgment nor to his reputation as a critic." "The concerto has made its way in the world," he wrote years later, after it had in fact become one of Tchaikovsky's most beloved works, "and after all, that is the most important thing. It is impossible to please everybody."

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