

Conversation / The Tchaikovsky Performers

BY KENNETH LAFAVE



This month and next, over three and a half weeks, the New York Philharmonic will explore the music of Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky in the Philharmonic Festival: *The Tchaikovsky Experience*. Beginning on September 26 and concluding on October 16, the festival will survey the art of the 19th-century Russian composer whose work, arguably, is the most popular classical music among 21st-century American audiences. In the following conversation, moderated by Kenneth LaFave, the musicians who will appear with the Orchestra discuss this composer's enduring appeal.

Tchaikovsky is popular around the world, yet in his lifetime he met with antipathy from critics, and his reputation since has not exactly flourished among critics and musicologists. Why is this so?

Lorin Maazel: Tchaikovsky was excoriated by the intellectual community. His Sixth Symphony, one of the great masterpieces of the Romantic literature, was greeted by the major critic in Moscow as the ravings of a man in the last stages of paresis. Tchaikovsky was an extremely sensitive, well-educated, refined human being. The

vulgarity that we associate with his music stem from the vulgarities of the minds of the interpreters through their steps out of bounds. Tchaikovsky was a Classical composer basically, and he was forever writing expressions in his music with nobility, with restraint, with delicacy. Stripped of all these vulgarizations, his music then emerges pure, pristine, and very noble.

Johannes Moser: He is like Mozart. It is no coincidence that, of all composers, Tchaikovsky revered Mozart the most. When Tchaikovsky thought of doing a cello concerto, he realized there was no Mozart cello concerto, and so he wrote the *Rococo Variations* [in 1876] in homage. In it, we are seeing the Classical era in Tchaikovsky's mirror.

And a very Romantic mirror it is. If Tchaikovsky looked back, did he not also look ahead? Not many commentators view him as forward-thinking.

Ludovic Morlot: I believe he was a great modernist in terms of form. His subjects are very Romantic, but in his symphonies, mainly, the form is extremely modern. Think of the *Scherzo* in the Fourth Symphony, with the strings pizzicato throughout: I don't know of anyone doing that before Tchaikovsky. And it must have been very puzzling at the turn of the last century to be exposed to the last movement of the *Pathétique* [Symphony No. 6]. It opens the door for Mahler.

Tchaikovsky anticipates Mahler not only in freedom of form, but in the sheer length of his scores.

Janine Jansen: His Violin Concerto is one of the biggest ever written. It's

incredibly demanding. The first movement is already like a whole concerto. In the middle is this huge cadenza, then there's still halfway to go.

There's also the famous opening of the Piano Concerto No. 1, a sprawling Romantic theme that simply disappears, never to be developed or even show up again at all. And it's in D-flat major, whereas the rest of the concerto is in B-flat minor.

Simon Trpčeski: The first movement actually ends in B-flat major. Tchaikovsky can play around with these things because he is a master of melody and harmony. He has a perfect vision of what he wants and knows exactly how to realize it. He was definitely forward-looking.

So it's not the formal aspect of his music that gets to audiences so much as those incredible, hummable tunes?

Trpčeski: What amazes me is Tchaikovsky's gift for simple melodies that instantly capture the heart.

Moser: He was the perfect example of what came out of the big crash of Classical music with the French Revolution. Before that, there were codes in music, and you needed to know these in order

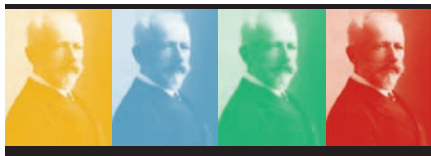


Lorin Maazel presides over *The Tchaikovsky Experience*

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Conversation



to understand the music. Afterward, music had to be for everyone. In that sense, Tchaikovsky is almost “pop” — he impacts all levels of listeners and excludes nobody. And that, actually, is a big challenge for the interpreter. You must be careful not to make his music too flat, too simple. It can get trivial very easily, and that’s a danger.

Why were these particular works chosen for the festival?

Maazel: Obviously, Tchaikovsky is a very prolific composer. We would not have been able to include every work of importance of his. But there’ll be a good number of his well-known compositions together with those less well known, which we believe will give a very clear picture to our subscribers and those who attend our concerts of just who this genius was and what he was capable of doing.

Composer Kenneth LaFave writes about music for a variety of publications.

“A BIG SUCCESS”

The New York Philharmonic’s connection with Tchaikovsky is not limited to the Orchestra’s 317 performances of the *Pathétique* Symphony, or its having given the world premiere of the composer’s Piano Concerto No. 2 in 1881, or the U.S. premieres of 11 other works. Perhaps the most noteworthy bond centers on the night of May 5, 1891. That was when the New York Symphony (one of the current Philharmonic’s forebears) gave the inaugural concert at Andrew Carnegie’s Music Hall (now, simply, Carnegie Hall) on 57th Street. On that occasion Tchaikovsky conducted the Orchestra in his own *Festival Coronation March* in a rare personal triumph. In his diary that night, he wrote: “Excitement. My turn. Was welcomed very loudly.... A big success.”

ALL PHOTOS CHRIS LEE EXCEPT JANSEN



Simon Trpceski shares his passion for the Piano Concerto No. 1, September 26–29



Janine Jansen shines in the Violin Concerto, October 3–6



Johannes Moser joins the Philharmonic for the *Rococo Variations*, October 10–11, 13



Ludovic Morlot conducts the Symphony No. 6, *Pathétique*, October 16

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