

# 1812 Overture, Op. 49

PYOTR ILYICH TCHAIKOVSKY

## Born

May 7, 1840, in Votkinsk, Russia

## Died

November 6, 1893, in St. Petersburg

## Work composed

October 12–November 19, 1880

## World premiere

August 20, 1882, in a hall built for the occasion on the grounds of the Exhibition of Industry and the Arts in Moscow, Ippolit Karlovich Altani conducting

## New York Philharmonic premiere

June 18, 1901, Walter Damrosch conducting the New York Symphony (which merged with the New York Philharmonic in 1928 to form today's New York Philharmonic)

## Most recent New York Philharmonic performance

July 7, 2007, Bramwell Tovey, conductor, in Bethel, New York

## Estimated duration

ca. 16 minutes

to it in the excellent *Harvard Dictionary of Music*, the *Random House Encyclopedic Dictionary of Classical Music*, or even the 29 volumes of the latest edition of *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, the sine qua non of English-language music-reference compendia.

Occasional music is nothing more than music written for a specific occasion, most commonly a public celebration of some officially declared festivity: the celebration of a birthday, name day, elevation, or coronation of some notable person; the dedication of a monument; the opening of a fair; and so on. Paging through Tchaikovsky's catalogue, for example, we find him doing yeoman service to various events through the *Serenade for Nikolai Rubinstein's Name-day* (an 1872 chamber-music piece), *Cantata in Commemoration of the Bicentenary of the Birth of Peter the Great* (also from 1872), *March for the Volunteer Fleet* (issued in 1878 under the pseudonym P. Sinopov), *Music for a Tableau Vivant of Montenegrins Receiving the News of Russia's Declaration of War on Turkey* (1880, a work that has been lost), *Jurists' March and Jurists' Song for the Golden Jubilee of the School of Jurisprudence* (1885), *Greeting to Anton Rubinstein for His Golden Jubilee as an Artist* (1889), and *Military March for the 98th Yurevsky Regiment* (1893).

And, of course, there's his *1812 Overture* — or *The Year 1812*, or *Festival Overture*, or *Solemn Overture*, as competing editions have sometimes put it. It was in 1812 that Napoleon's Grand Army invaded Moscow, only to find that the Russian Army had withdrawn from the other side and burned the city and its contents on their way, leaving the French to starve, freeze, and retreat into the Russian winter. Tchaikovsky's colleague Nikolai Rubinstein approached the composer to ask him to memorialize that

Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky's *1812 Overture* falls under the rubric of "occasional music," which, of all the categories of classical compositions, occupies the rung of slightest ongoing prestige. The term is bandied about liberally, usually with a pinch of condescension, but nobody seems even to take the time to dignify it as a proper endeavor in and of itself. You will search in vain for an article dedicated

event through a composition that might be played at the opening of an Exhibition of Industry and the Arts that was being planned — or, if not for that, then to be played at the Czar’s Silver Jubilee or at the opening of the Cathedral of Christ the Savior, then under construction in Moscow.

Tchaikovsky objected to writing such a work — “It seems you think ceremonial pieces for an exhibition is some sort of ultimate bliss of which I shall hasten to avail myself.” However, he accepted the commission and chose the third option, that it should accompany the inauguration of the new Cathedral (or, as he put it, “the *cathedral*, which I don’t like at all”). As it happened, the Cathedral’s consecration did not take place until later than anticipated, so Tchaikovsky’s work was unveiled nine months before that celebration, in a hall constructed for the occasion on the grounds of the Exhibition of Industry and the Arts.

Despite his whining (and there was lots more to come), Tchaikovsky delivered precisely the piece Rubinstein had requested: “15 to 25 minutes long, with or without a chorus” — Tchaikovsky chose without — and “with a hint of church music which must certainly be Orthodox.” This episodic work does include a bit of Orthodox chant (“Save Us, O Lord”), in addition to a bit of folk song, the *Marseillaise* (representing the French), the Russian national hymn (“God Save the Czar”), and, near the end, a deafening din of church bells and military cannon.

**Instrumentation:** two flutes and piccolo, two oboes and English horn, two clarinets, two bassoons, four horns, four trumpets, three trombones, tuba, timpani, snare drum, bass drum, cymbals, triangle, tambourine, orchestra bells, electronic keyboard, chimes, and strings.

## The Composer Protests

For all the occasional music he wrote in his career, the request for what would be the *1812 Overture* seems to have gotten under Tchaikovsky’s skin more than usual. He complained



Tchaikovsky

about it not only to Nikolai Rubinstein, who had proffered the commission, but also to his mysterious patron, Nadezhda von Meck, to whom he wrote, “There is nothing less to my liking than composing for the sake of some festivities” and (in a follow-up letter) “The overture will be very loud and noisy, but I wrote it with no warm feeling of love, and therefore there will be no artistic merits in it.”

Nonetheless, he clearly felt it had something to commend it — what’s not to love about the opening, for example, with the divided lower strings singing the Orthodox chant? Before long he set about trying to secure orchestral performances of the piece, even before it had been presented at the inauguration of the Cathedral, the event for which he had composed this music.