

Capriccio italien, Op. 45

Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky

A browse through Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky's catalogue yields a handful of works that reflect his enthusiasm for things Italian, such as his *Romeo and Juliet Overture-Fantasy* (1869) and a stand-alone duet (1878) from the same Shakespeare play set in Verona; a lost orchestral piece titled *The Romans in the Coliseum* (1863–64); his *Francesca da Rimini* “symphonic fantasia after Dante” (1876); his string sextet *Souvenir de Florence* (1890); his song “Pimpinella” (1878), overtly based on a Florentine popular tune; and his orchestrations of operatic selections by Stradella and Cimarosa (1870). Also prominent on the list is his *Capriccio italien* (with its oddly bilingual title), which Tchaikovsky composed in 1880 when he actually was in Italy.

By then the composer had already visited that country three times: in the summer of 1873, briefly; on a more extended tour to Venice, Rome, Naples, and Florence in April 1874; and from December 1878 until March 1879, when he was based in Florence recovering from the nervous breakdown that had been precipitated by his fleetingly brief, yet utterly disastrous, marriage. On this extended stay during his fourth visit (two further Italian journeys would follow in 1881), he was having a much better time, particularly since he was in the company of his brother Modest, who organized

their itineraries to various museums and landmarks and generally attended to promoting good spirits. Although these sunny skies darkened on January 21, when word arrived that their father had died back in St. Petersburg, the news did not interrupt Tchaikovsky's incipient work on his *Italian Suite on Folk Melodies* (to use the name he had employed when he wrote to his friend Sergei Taneyev about this project in a letter five days earlier).

At the end of December Tchaikovsky had written a letter to his benefactor, Nadezhda von Meck, that dropped hints about this piece. On January 28 he wrote to her that his intention was “to compose something like the Spanish fantasias of Glinka,” and a week later he reported to her:

I have already completed the sketches for an Italian fantasia on folk tunes for which I believe a good future may be predicted. It will be effective, thanks to the delightful tunes which I have succeeded in assembling partly from anthologies, partly through my own ears on the streets.

In Short

Born: May 7, 1840, in Votkinsk, Russia

Died: November 6, 1893, in St. Petersburg

Work composed: January–May 1880; dedicated to “M. Charles Davidoff,” i.e., Karl Yulevich Davidoff, a distinguished cellist and the director of the St. Petersburg Conservatory

World premiere: December 6, 1880, in Moscow, at a concert of the Russian Musical Society, Nikolai Rubinstein, conductor

New York Philharmonic premiere: November 5, 1886, Walter Damrosch conducting the New York Symphony (which would merge with the New York Philharmonic in 1928 to become today's New York Philharmonic)

Most recent New York Philharmonic performance: July 25, 2007, Bramwell Tovey, conductor, at the Bravo! Vail Valley Music Festival in Vail, Colorado

Estimated duration: ca. 15 minutes

Apparently Tchaikovsky then tucked his score away for a few months, and brought it out again in May (after he had returned to Russia in March) to work out its orchestration. This he completed on May 27, 1880, and at that point he attached to the piece its definitive title, *Capriccio italien*.

Tchaikovsky was always given to self-doubt when it came to his compositions, and this piece was no exception. As he neared the date that was scheduled to be the work's premiere, he began to voice fears not so much about its surface effect – he knew that his orchestration had achieved the brilliant sheen he wanted (not really a typical Tchaikovskian sound) – but rather about the piece's thematic substance. These were not themes that he had devised, and he worried that his instinct in employing them might have been misguided.

Tchaikovsky claimed that these were folk themes, though in all the intervening years

only two of the piece's five principal melodies have been identified. Modest revealed that the opening fanfare referred to a trumpet call that emanated daily from a cavalry barracks next door to their hotel in Rome, and the tarantella that closes the composition has been identified as a piece known in Italian as *ciccuza*. Sources indicate that other tunes encountered in the *Capriccio italien* are sometimes heard in Italy with words attached, but it is debated whether these represent the actual folk songs that Tchaikovsky heard or are “fake folk songs,” their words retrofitted to tunes that became well known because of Tchaikovsky's composition.

Instrumentation: two flutes and piccolo, two oboes and English horn, two clarinets, two bassoons, four horns, two trumpets plus two cornets, three trombones, tuba, timpani, triangle, tambourine, cymbals, bass drum, orchestra bells, harp, and strings.

Happy Days

The year that Tchaikovsky wrote his *Capriccio italien*, 1880, represented an overwhelmingly happy interlude in the composer's often tumultuous, depression-ridden life. At the end of that year the composer wrote to his patron, Nadezhda von Meck:

As I look back on the passing year I must sing a hymn of thanksgiving to fate for the great number of good days I have spent both in Russia and abroad. I can say that for this whole year I have enjoyed undisturbed security, and have been happy as far as happiness is possible. Of course, there have also been bitter moments – but only moments. What is more, these only arose from the misfortunes of people close to me while I, strictly speaking, have personally enjoyed unqualified happiness and contentment. This was the first year of my life during which I was the whole time a free man.

