Notes on the Program
By James M. Keller, Program Annotator, The Leni and Peter May Chair

Concerto for Orchestra No. 1, Naughy Limericks
Rodion Shchedrin

Rodion Shchedrin became an important figure in Russian music not only through his compositions but also through his involvement in the complicated politics of the Soviet musical establishment. As early as 1955, the year he graduated from the Moscow Conservatory, he was advocating for the government to loosen restrictions on performing such essential composers as Mahler, Debussy, and Ravel. Although he managed to avoid joining the Communist Party, he negotiated a course that inspired necessary reforms without being so strident that his voice would be silenced. In 1973 he succeeded Dmitri Shostakovich as chairman of the Composers’ Union of the Russian Federation, a post he held until 1990.

By that time cracks were widening in the Soviet political hierarchy and Shchedrin became active in the perestroika movement. In 1989 he joined the dissident scientist Andrei Sakharov and soon-to-be Russian President Boris Yeltsin as members of the forward-looking Inter-regional Group of People’s Deputies in Support of Perestroika, which helped open the door to the new Russia of the post-1991 political restructuring. With the normalizing of Russian relations with the West, Shchedrin expanded his activities in Western Europe. For many years he has divided his time between Moscow and Munich.

In 1997 he was named honorary professor of the Moscow Conservatory, where he had taught composition from the mid to late 1960s. That was one of many honors that have been bestowed on Shchedrin. He had already received the USSR State Prize (1972), Lenin Prize (1984), State Prize of Russia (1992), and Dmitri Shostakovich Prize (1993), and outside his homeland he had been granted honorary membership in the International Music Council (1985), corresponding memberships in the Bavarian Academy of Fine Arts (1976) and Academy of Fine Arts of the German Democratic Republic (1983), and membership in the Berlin Academy of the Arts (1989). More recent entries in his roster of awards include the Russian Federation State Order (2002) and the Russian State Order 2nd Class “for services to his country” (2007), as well as honorary professorships at the St. Petersburg Conservatory (2005) and Beijing’s Central Conservatory of Music (2008) and such recording awards as Germany’s Echo Klassik (2008) and Russia’s Golden Mask (2009).

Shchedrin’s compositions cover a remarkable range of musical styles, drawing inspiration from folk influences, liturgical music, experimental modernism, neo-Romanticism, postmodern recontextualizing, and much else. His notable works for the stage include

In Short

Born: December 16, 1932, in Moscow, Russia
Resides: in Moscow, and Munich, Germany
Work composed: 1963; dedicated to Gennady Rozhdestvensky
World premiere: September 1963 in Warsaw, Poland, by the Radio and Television Large Symphony Orchestra, Gennady Rozhdestvensky, conductor
New York Philharmonic premiere: these performances
Estimated duration: ca. 9 minutes
seven operas; one of them, *The Enchanted Wanderer* (2002), an “opera for the concert stage,” was commissioned and premiered by the New York Philharmonic. (The Orchestra also commissioned his *Chimes: Concerto for Orchestra No. 2*; Leonard Bernstein led its premiere in 1968.) Ballet has appealed greatly to Shchedrin, who was married to the ballerina Maya Plisetskaya from 1958 until her passing in 2015. Two of his most popular scores were written for dance: *Konyok-gorbunok* (*The Little Hunchbacked Horse*) and *Karmen-Syuita* (his colorful transcription of portions of Bizet’s *Carmen Suite*).

Good humor is at the heart of his *Naughty Limericks*, the first of what are now five pieces titled “Concerto for Orchestra.” Its Russian title is *Ozornïye chastushki*. *Chastushki* are not really limericks — the Russian word is too specific to translate precisely — although they invoke similar assumptions. They are short vernacular songs of irreverent intent, their humor often taking an ironic, satirical, or politically subversive stance. They may include an unexpected plot twist and they delight in the off-color, yet they do not share the limerick’s poetic structure. *Mischievous Melodies* and *Dirty Ditties* have been floated as possible translations for this work, but *Naughty Limericks* has stuck.

Shchedrin makes fragmentary allusions to dozens of *chastushki*, and if non-Russians are unlikely to grasp that aspect of the piece, listeners can still appreciate its high jinks. Violinists attack their music stands with their bows, horn players slap their mouthpieces, the pianist imitates a balalaika, and the bass trombone proposes some of the rudest sounds in the orchestral repertoire. Can *Petrushka* be far away?

**Instrumentation:** two flutes and piccolo, two oboes and English horn, three clarinets (one doubling bass clarinet), two bassoons and contrabassoon, four horns, four trumpets, four trombones, timpani, wooden spoons, crotales, whips, snare drum, cymbals, bass drum, tam-tam, harp, piano, and strings.

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**In the Composer’s Words**

Rodion Shchedrin elaborated on the use of irreverent Russian songs known as *chastushki*:

In a chastushka there is always humor, irony, and sharp satire of the status quo, its defenders, and the “leaders of the people.” Brevity is its chief characteristic. Its specifically musical traits are a four-square and asymmetric structure, a deliberately primitive melody of few notes, driving syncopated rhythm, improvisation, repetition involving variation, and most of all a sense of humor pervading both words and music.

Unfortunately, the chastushka is associated in the minds of many musicians with simple tunes of eight bars, suggesting nothing but boredom. I like to think, however, that this modest and unassuming form may be likened to a door opening, as in an old fairy tale, upon a world of most varied and inexhaustible musical riches. In *Naughty Limericks*, conceived as a virtuosic orchestral work, I treat only the comic and dance chastushka tunes. The concertante style and virtuosic effects are, to my mind, inherent in this type of chastushka.