

program notes

BY DR. RICHARD E. RODDA

Peter Ilyich Tchaikovsky 1840-1893

“Trepak” from *The Nutcracker*

In Act I of *The Nutcracker*, the young Clara receives a giant Nutcracker as a Christmas gift. When everyone else is in bed, she steals back into the living room, where the Nutcracker springs to life and leads a battalion of gingerbread men in battle against an invading army of mice. The Nutcracker is confronted by the Mouse King himself, and he appears about to meet his fate when Clara hurls her slipper at the rodent-monster and kills him. The mice, leaderless, flee, and the Nutcracker is transformed into a gallant Prince. As reward for saving his life, he invites Clara to visit his kingdom. She accepts.

Act II is set in the great hall of the castle. At a sign from the Sugar-Plum Fairy, a sumptuous banquet appears. Clara is ushered to a throne at the head of the table, and a divertissement in her honor begins, which includes a *Trepak*, the fiery traditional dance of the Russian cossacks.

Selections from *Swan Lake* (1875-1876)

Act I of *Swan Lake* is a festival celebrating the coming of age of Prince Siegfried the following day, when he must choose a bride. Attracted by a flight of swans over the castle, Siegfried and his

friends form a hunting party and leave the festivity. At the beginning of Act II, Siegfried arrives at the lake to see the swans, led by Odette, the Swan Queen, glide across the surface. Just as Siegfried is about to unleash his crossbow, Odette appears to him not in avian form but as a beautiful princess. She tells him that she and the other swan-maidens live under a curse by the evil magician Rothbart which lets them take human shape just from midnight to dawn. The spell can be broken, she says, only by one who promises to love her and no other. Though Rothbart vows to undo them both, Siegfried promises his love to Odette. Act III is again set in the castle. Amid the birthday celebration, Rothbart, in disguise, suddenly enters with his daughter, Odile, who appears to Siegfried in the exact image of Odette. Odette, hovering at the window, tries to warn Siegfried of the deception, but to no avail. Siegfried asks for Odile's hand in marriage. Rothbart and Odile exult in their vile triumph. Siegfried realizes he has been trapped. Odette seems doomed. In Act IV, Odette returns to the lake, prepared to kill herself. The other maidens urge her to wait for the Prince. He appears, and again vows his love to her, but she knows that Rothbart's power can only be broken by death. She throws herself from the parapet of a lakeside fortress. Siegfried, his life meaningless without her, follows. Rothbart's enchantment is destroyed by the power of love. At the final curtain, Odette and Siegfried are seen sailing off together on a beautiful, celestial ship, united forever.

Piano Concerto No. 1 in B-flat minor, Op. 23 (1874-1875)

At the end of 1874, Tchaikovsky began a piano concerto with the hope of having a success great enough to allow him to leave his irksome teaching post at the Moscow Conservatory. By late December, he had largely sketched out the work, and sought the advice of Nikolai Rubinstein, Director of the Moscow Conservatory and an excellent pianist. Tchaikovsky reported the interview in a letter: "On Christmas Eve 1874, Nikolai asked me to play the Concerto. We agreed to it. After I played through the work, there burst forth from Rubinstein's mouth a mighty torrent of words. It appeared that my Concerto was utterly worthless, absolutely unplayable; the piece as a whole was bad, trivial, vulgar." Tchaikovsky was furious and he made only one change in the score: he obliterated the name of the original dedicatee — Nikolai Rubinstein — and substituted that of the virtuoso pianist Hans von Bülow, who was performing Tchaikovsky's piano pieces across Europe. Bülow gladly accepted the dedication and asked to program the premiere on his upcoming American tour. The Concerto created such a sensation when it was first heard, in Boston on October 25, 1875, that Bülow played it on 139 of his 172 concerts that season.

The Concerto opens with a sweeping introductory melody. Following a *decrescendo* and a pause, the piano presents the snapping main theme. (Tchaikovsky said that this curious melody was inspired by a tune he heard sung by a blind beggar at a street fair.) The clarinet announces the lyrical

second subject. The outer sections of the second movement's three-part structure (A–B–A) are based on a languid melody introduced by the flute; the central episode uses a swift, balletic melody. A crisp rhythmic motive presented at the beginning of the finale dominates much of the movement. To balance the vigor of this music, a romantic melody is given by the violins. The two themes contend until the Concerto comes to its rousing close.

Symphony No. 6 in B minor, Op. 74, "Pathétique" (1893)

Tchaikovsky died in 1893, at the age of only 53. His death was long attributed to the accidental drinking of a glass of un-boiled water during a cholera outbreak, but that theory has been questioned in recent years with the alternate explanation that he was forced to take his own life because of a homosexual liaison with the underage son of a noble family. Though the manner of Tchaikovsky's death is incidental to the place of his Sixth Symphony in music history, the fact of it is not.

Tchaikovsky conducted his B minor Symphony for the first time only a week before his death. It was given a cool reception by musicians and public, and his frustration was multiplied when discussion of the work was avoided by the guests at a dinner party following the concert on October 28, 1893. Three days later, however, his mood seemed brighter and he told a friend that he was not yet ready to be snatched off by death, "that snubbed-nose horror. I feel that I shall live a long time." He was wrong. He died on November 6. Memorial concerts were planned. One of the first was in St. Petersburg on November 18th, twelve days

after his death, when Eduard Napravnik conducted the Sixth Symphony. It was a resounding success and was wafted by the winds of sorrow across the musical world, becoming — and remaining — one of the most popular of all symphonies, the quintessential expression of tragedy in music.

The “Pathétique” Symphony opens with a slow introduction dominated by the sepulchral intonation of the bassoon, whose melody, in a faster tempo, becomes the first theme of the exposition; the tension subsides for the yearning second theme. The tempestuous development begins with a mighty blast from the full orchestra. The recapitulation is more condensed, vibrantly scored and emotionally intense than the exposition. Tchaikovsky referred to the second movement as a scherzo, though its 5/4 meter gives it more the feeling of a waltz with a limp. The third movement is a boisterous march. A profound emptiness pervades the closing movement, which maintains its slow tempo and mood of despair throughout.

1812 Overture, Op. 49 (1880)

In 1880, the Cathedral of Christ the Redeemer was erected in Moscow to commemorate the events of 1812, when Napoleon was driven from Russia. For the Cathedral’s consecration, Nikolai Rubinstein, head of the Moscow Conservatory and director of the Russian Musical Society, planned a celebratory festival of music, and he asked Tchaikovsky to write a work for the occasion. That *1812 Overture* represents the conflict, militarily and musically, of Russia and France, and the eventual Russian “victory” over the invaders.

ALLENTOWN SYMPHONY ORCHESTRA

NOVEMBER 9-10, 2019
8:00 P.M., SYMPHONY HALL

P R O G R A M

DIANE M. WITTRY MUSIC DIRECTOR/CONDUCTOR

PETER ILYICH TCHAIKOVSKY

“Trepak” from *The Nutcracker*

Selections from *Swan Lake*

Scene

Waltz

Repertory Dance Theater:

Piano Concerto No. 1 in B-flat minor, Op. 23
Allegro non troppo e molto maestoso — Allegro con spirito
Andantino semplice — Prestissimo
Allegro con fuoco

Piano Soloist: Drew Peterson

INTERMISSION

Symphony No. 6 in B minor, Op. 74, “Pathétique”
Adagio — Allegro non troppo
Allegro con grazia
Allegro molto vivace
Finale: Adagio lamentoso

1812 Overture, Op. 49