

program notes

BY DR. RICHARD E. RODDA

Overture to *The Song of Hiawatha*, Op. 30, No. 3 (1899)

SAMUEL COLERIDGE-TAYLOR ■ 1875-1912

Though Samuel Coleridge-Taylor was English by birth, training and residence, he was unquestionably a hero to American audiences. Born in London in 1875 to a white English woman and a physician from Sierra Leone, Samuel was brought up in suburban Croydon by his mother after his father returned to Africa to practice medicine. As a boy, Coleridge-Taylor studied violin with a local teacher, sang in a church choir, and showed talent as a composer, and in 1890, he was admitted to the Royal College of Music. By the time he graduated in 1897, he had produced a significant collection of works, including a symphony and several large chamber compositions, a number of which were performed publicly. His music became known to Edward Elgar, who offered the young musician advice and encouragement. Coleridge-Taylor's greatest success came in 1898 with the premiere of the cantata *Hiawatha's Wedding Feast*, the first of several works inspired by the poetry of Henry Wadsworth Longfellow. He held a number of conducting and teaching positions thereafter in London, including appointments as professor of composition at the Trinity College of Music and Guildhall School of Music. Coleridge-Taylor composed steadily throughout his life, and became one of the most respected musicians of his

generation on both sides of the Atlantic — New York orchestral players described him as the “Black Mahler” on his visit to that city in 1910. His premature death from pneumonia at the age of 37 in 1912 seems to have been a result of overwork.

The best-known of Coleridge-Taylor's works is *Hiawatha's Wedding Feast*, the first of three cantatas inspired by Longfellow's epic poem *The Song of Hiawatha*. In 1899, he wrote an Overture to precede the triptych that evidences his gifts for both lyricism and drama. The Overture is built in a well-crafted sonata form with slow introduction whose poignant main theme recalls the spiritual *Nobody Knows the Trouble I've Seen*; the expressive second theme is introduced by horns, clarinets, violas and cellos. The Overture closes with an affirmative coda based on a choral episode from *Hiawatha's Wedding Feast*.

Concerto for Violin and Orchestra in B minor, Op. 61 (1909-1910)

EDWARD ELGAR ■ 1857- 1934

In April 1909, shortly after Hans Richter had introduced the First Symphony in Manchester and London, Elgar and his wife, Alice, accepted an invitation to visit their American friend Mrs. Julia Worthington at her villa in Careggi, near Florence. Feeling drained by a decade of intense creative work that yielded the *Enigma Variations*, *The Dream of Gerontius*, *Cockaigne*, *Sea Pictures*, *Introduction and Allegro*, *The Apostles*, *The Kingdom* and the Symphony No. 1, Elgar had sworn off music for the time being, and

happily played the part of the tourist in Italy. The Elgars traipsed about Tuscany and made an excursion to Venice.

As it had Mendelssohn and Brahms and Berlioz during the previous century, Italy inspired Elgar to composition. While in Careggi his muse was rekindled and the first sketches for two new works — a violin concerto and another symphony — appeared. Elgar left Italy in early June, stopping at Garmisch-Partenkirchen for a session of sincere mutual admiration with Richard Strauss, and arrived home on June 16th. He worked some more on the concerto, but the second half of 1909 was heavily booked with festival appearances and conducting engagements. He was able to resume work on the Violin Concerto in January 1910, and finished the score on August 5th. “It’s good! awfully emotional! too emotional, but I love it,” he said of it.

John F. Porte wrote of the Concerto’s opening sonata-form movement, “Elgar’s vein of tender sentiment is perhaps the most lovable of all its kind in music, and shared by that of Schubert; Elgar never shows us a soul that is seared or tortured, for while he can feel, he does not despair. An extreme sensitiveness to poetic ideas or reflections is part of Elgar’s thought, but this is always counterbalanced by a breezy reaction, a throwing aside, as it were, of anything which might lead to doubt; it is the ascendant spirit, the strong faith in himself, the blessing of common pluck, which never failed him.” The second movement continues in a similar vein, though is more given to song than to rhetoric. Elgar once said that he wrote the finale as a frame for the accompanied cadenza that lies at its heart. Themes from the earlier movements are recalled and transformed in the course of the finale to unify the work.

Symphony No. 4 in F minor, Op. 36 (1877-1878)

PIOTR ILYICH TCHAIKOVSKY ■ 1840-1893

The Fourth Symphony was a product of the most crucial and turbulent time of Tchaikovsky’s life — 1877, when he met two women who forced him into a period of intense introspection. The first was the sensitive, music-loving widow of a wealthy Russian railroad baron, Nadezhda von Meck, who became not only his personal confidante but also the financial backer who allowed him to quit his irksome teaching job at the Moscow Conservatory to devote himself entirely to composition. Though they never met, her place in Tchaikovsky’s life was enormous and beneficial.

The second woman to enter Tchaikovsky’s life in 1877 was Antonina Miliukov, an unnoticed student in one of his large lecture classes at the Conservatory who had worked herself into a passion over her professor. Tchaikovsky paid her no special attention, and he had quite forgotten her when he received an ardent love letter professing her flaming and unquenchable desire to meet him. Tchaikovsky (age 37), who should have burned the thing, answered the letter of the 28-year-old Antonina in a polite, cool fashion, but did not include an outright rejection of her advances. He had been considering marriage for almost a year in the hope that it would give him both the stable home life that he had not enjoyed in the twenty years since his mother died, as well as to help dispel the all-too-true rumors of his homosexuality. He hoped he might achieve both those goals with Antonina. What a welter of emotions must have gripped his heart when, a few weeks later, he proposed marriage to her! Inevitably,

the marriage crumbled within days of the wedding amid Tchaikovsky's self-deprecation.

It was during May and June that Tchaikovsky sketched the Fourth Symphony, finishing the first three movements before Antonina began her siege. The finale was completed by the time he proposed. Because of that chronology, the program of the Symphony was not a direct result of his marital disaster. All that — the July wedding, the mere eighteen days of bitter conjugal farce, the two separations — postdated the actual composition of the Symphony by a few months. What Tchaikovsky found in his relationship with this woman (who by 1877 already showed signs of approaching the door of the mental ward in which, still legally married to him, she died in 1917) was a confirmation of his belief in the inexorable workings of Fate in human destiny.

Tchaikovsky wrote of the Fourth Symphony: "The introduction [blaring brasses heard in a motto theme that recurs throughout the Symphony] represents Fate, which hinders one in the pursuit of happiness. There is nothing to do but to submit and vainly complain [the melancholy, syncopated shadow-waltz of the main theme]. Would it not be better to turn away from reality and lull one's self in dreams? [The second theme is begun by the clarinet.] But no — these are but dreams: roughly we are awakened by Fate. [A brass fanfare begins the development.] The *Andantino* shows how sad that so much has already been and gone! In the Scherzo are capricious arabesques, vague figures that slip into the imagination when one is slightly intoxicated. Military music is heard in the distance. If you find no pleasure in yourself go to the people, so the finale [based on the traditional song *A Birch Stood in the Meadow*] pictures a folk holiday."

ALLENTOWN SYMPHONY ORCHESTRA

APRIL 15-16, 2023
8:00 P.M., SYMPHONY HALL

P R O G R A M

DIANE M. WITTRY MUSIC DIRECTOR/CONDUCTOR

Overture to *The Song of Hiawatha*, SAMUEL COLERIDGE-TAYLOR
Op. 30, No. 3

Concerto for Violin and Orchestra EDWARD ELGAR
in B minor, Op. 61

Allegro

Andante

Allegro molto

SCHADT COMPETITION WINNER, Violin

I N T E R M I S S I O N

Symphony No. 4 in F minor, Op. 36 PIOTR ILYICH TCHAIKOVSKY

Andante sostenuto — Moderato con anima

Andantino in modo di canzona

Scherzo: Pizzicato ostinato (Allegro)

Finale: Allegro con fuoco