



Russian Festival: Joyce Yang Returns

Our Russian Festival continues today as guest conductor Stefan Asbury leads the orchestra in music by Prokofiev and Rimsky-Korsakov. The stellar pianist Joyce Yang joins them for Tchaikovsky's show-stopping Piano Concerto No. 1.

NIKOLAI RIMSKY-KORSAKOV

Born 18 March 1844; Tikhvin, Russia

Died 21 June 1908; Lybensk, Russia

Russian Easter Overture, Opus 36

Composed: 1887-88

First performance: 15 December 1888; St. Petersburg, Russia

Last MSO performance: June 2000; Andrews Sill, conductor

Instrumentation: 3 flutes (3rd doubling piccolo); 2 oboes; 2 clarinets; 2 bassoons; 4 horns; 2 trumpets; 3 trombones; tuba; timpani; percussion (bass drum, cymbals, glockenspiel, suspended cymbals, tam tam, triangle); harp; strings

Approximate duration: 14 minutes

Most classical music enthusiasts know Rimsky-Korsakov primarily by three pieces: the *Capriccio espagnol*, the *Russian Easter Festival Overture*, and *Scheherazade*, all written within a span of less than two years (1887-88). Though the composer was only in his mid-40s, they became virtually his last essays in purely orchestral music, for in 1889 he decided to expend most of his creative energy writing opera.

Rimsky-Korsakov based the *Overture* on melodies taken from the *Obikhod*, a sort of Russian Orthodox *Liber usualis*. In the preface to the score, he quoted verses from Psalm 68 and St. Mark's gospel (chapter 16), and added a few lines of his own. The latter, referencing a more primeval springtime symbolism, reflect his essentially pantheistic beliefs.

In his autobiography, *My Musical Life*, the composer offered the following program note:

This legendary and heathen side of the holiday, this transition from the gloomy and mysterious evening of Passion Saturday to the unbridled pagan-religious merry-making of Easter Sunday, is what I was eager to reproduce in my overture... The rather lengthy slow introduction... on the theme "Let God arise" [woodwinds], alternating with the ecclesiastical melody "An angel cried out" [solo cello], appeared to me, in the beginning, as it were, the ancient prophecy of Isaiah of the Resurrection of Christ. The gloomy colors of the *Andante lugubre* seemed to depict the Holy Sepulchre that had shone with ineffable light at the moment of the Resurrection, in the transition to the Allegro of the overture. The beginning of the *Allegro*, the theme "Let them also that hate Him flee before Him," led to the holiday mood of the Greek Orthodox service on Christ's matins; the solemn trumpet voice of the Archangel was replaced by a tonal reproduction of the joyous, almost dance-like tolling of bells, alternating now with the sexton's rapid reading and now with the conventional chant of the priest's reading the glad tidings of the Evangel. The *Obikhod* theme "Christ is arisen," which forms a sort of subsidiary part of the overture, appears amid the trumpet blasts and the bell-tolling, constituting a triumphant coda.

Recommended recording: Neeme Järvi, Gothenburg Symphony Orchestra (Deutsche Grammophon) 🎧

PIOTR ILYICH TCHAIKOVSKY

Born 7 May 1840; Kamsko-Votkinsk, Russia

Died 6 November 1893; St. Petersburg, Russia

Piano Concerto No. 1 in B-flat minor, Opus 23

Composed: 1874-75; revised in 1876 and 1889

First performance: 25 October 1875; Boston, Massachusetts

Last MSO performance: June 2016; Carlos Miguel Prieto, conductor;
Joyce Yang, piano

Instrumentation: 2 flutes; 2 oboes; 2 clarinets; 2 bassoons; 4 horns;
2 trumpets; 3 trombones; timpani; strings

Approximate duration: 32 minutes

Surely one of the most beloved 19th-century piano concertos in the repertoire, Tchaikovsky's Opus 23 was penned in 1874-75, between the composition of the Third and Fourth Symphonies. Originally intended for Nicolai Rubinstein, the head of the Moscow Conservatory, who had encouraged Tchaikovsky to write the work, it was dedicated to and premiered by Hans von Bülow after Rubinstein rejected it as unplayable. (He later recanted and was counted among its most distinguished interpreters.)

One of the greatest pianists of his day, Bülow was also a composer and conductor. He was a champion of the music of Wagner and, later, of Brahms. In the spring of 1875, Tchaikovsky sent the concerto to him and soon received a warm response, with sincere gratitude for the dedication:

Perhaps it would be presumptuous on my part, being unfamiliar with the whole scope of your works and prodigious talent, to say that for me your Opus 23 displays such brilliance, and is such a remarkable achievement among your musical works, that you have without doubt enriched the world of music as never before. There is such unsurpassed originality, such nobility, such strength, and there are so many arresting moments throughout this unique conception; there is such a maturity of form, such style – its design and execution, with such consonant harmonies, that I could weary you by listing all the memorable moments which caused me to thank the author – not to mention the pleasure from performing it all. In a word, this true gem shall earn you the gratitude of all pianists.

Bülow was eager to unveil the concerto on his upcoming American tour. It stretches the imagination to learn that this über-Russian concerto was premiered in Boston, played by a German pianist on an American Chickering piano accompanied by an orchestra of Massachusetts freelancers conducted by a long-forgotten American maestro (Benjamin Johnson Lang). The piece was a source of excitement throughout the tour, and it remains so today. It's difficult to improve on Bülow's description. As he noted, the concerto contrasts music of heroic strength and grandeur with soaring lyrical melodies. The deservedly famous opening pages – with the orchestra's fortissimo theme, the piano's crashing chords and cadenza-like passages – are followed by gentler melodies that mine the qualities of Slavic folk music. A solo flute introduces the romantic theme of the Andantino. A change of tempo and a dance-like melody provide contrast; a return to the initial material shapes the movement into a gratifying three-part form. Slavic flavor – and fervor – permeates the finale, a virtuosic showpiece that unquestionably delighted its dedicatee and an East Coast audience – one autumn evening during the Ulysses S. Grant administration.

Recommended recording: Martha Argerich; Kirill Kondrashin, Bavarian Radio Symphony Orchestra (Decca) 

SERGEI PROKOFIEV

Born 23 April 1891; Sontsovka, Russia

Died 5 March 1953; Moscow, Russia

Symphony No. 3 in C minor, Opus 44

Composed: 1928

First performance: 17 May 1929; Paris, France

Last MSO performance: MSO Premiere

Instrumentation: 2 flutes; piccolo; 2 oboes; English horn; 2 clarinets; bass clarinet; 2 bassoons; contrabassoon; 4 horns; 3 trumpets; 3 trombones; tuba; timpani; percussion (bass drum; castanets, chimes, cymbals, snare drum, tam tam, tambourine); 2 harps; strings

Approximate duration: 34 minutes

Sergei Prokofiev's Symphony No. 3 dates from the time he was living in Paris. Previously, following the Russian Revolution, he had spent several years in the United States, where his opera *The Love for Three Oranges* had its successful premiere in Chicago in 1921. While in the U.S., he had begun work on another opera, *The Fiery Angel*. When soprano Mary Garden, his foremost supporter, resigned her directorship of the Chicago Opera, his hopes for a performance of *The Fiery Angel* were dashed. He departed for Europe "with a thousand dollars in my pocket and an aching head," he said.

After conductor Bruno Walter scheduled performances of *The Fiery Angel* in Berlin, the composer spent several months in 1926 reconfiguring its dramatic structure and revising its music. Though the Berlin production was postponed indefinitely, Serge Koussevitsky led a concert performance of the second act in Paris in June 1928. Ultimately, Prokofiev never saw a full performance of *The Fiery Angel* during his lifetime. It was first staged in Venice, sung in Italian, in 1955. Its topics include demons, exorcism, orgies, and occultism.

Rather than construct an orchestral suite from the opera, Prokofiev – who placed high value on its music – decided to develop the thematic material into a symphony. His Opus 44 is a turbulent, bold, and intricate work, one whose drama and intensity betray its operatic origins. The composer rightly thought it to be one of his best efforts.

Crashing chords, clanking bells, and a general sense of unrest open the sonata-form Moderato. Strings and horns intone the first theme, an impassioned diatonic melody. The forlorn second theme is sounded by the bassoons and lower strings and, in the development section, a third theme is added. Huge orchestral chords and marching rhythms lead to the movement's climax. The recapitulation, with its gentle ostinato figures, is more ethereal and concludes with the sepulchral tones of the contrabassoon. The lyrical Andante, set in ternary form, features an introspective string chorale, transparent textures, and a brooding middle section whose theme is built on half-steps.

The dazzling third movement is in the form of a diabolical scherzo. Overall, there's a sense of foreboding as agitated strings, brass choir, and bass drum add to the chilling effect. The nearly deranged final movement reprises themes from the opening Moderato. It begins as an ominous Andante march that slowly gains speed, building to a cataclysmic climax of frighteningly violent power.

Recommended recording: Riccardo Chailly, Royal Concertgebouw Orchestra (Decca) 

Program notes by J. Mark Baker.