



Tchaikovsky's Pathétique

This weekend's performances feature music by two 20th-century composers, as well as one of the greatest of all Romantic-era symphonies. William Grant Still's WWII-inspired *Poem* opens the concert, then pianist Orli Shaham plays Béla Bartók's luminous Third Concerto. Following intermission, get out your hankies for Tchaikovsky's deeply affecting Symphony "Pathétique."

WILLIAM GRANT STILL

Born 11 May 1895; Woodville, Mississippi
Died 3 December 1978; Los Angeles, California

Poem for Orchestra

- Composed:** 1944
First performance: 7 December 1944; Cleveland, Ohio
Last MSO performance: MSO premiere
Instrumentation: 3 flutes (2nd and 3rd doubling piccolo), 2 oboes, English horn, 3 clarinets (3rd doubling bass clarinet), 2 bassoons (2nd doubling contrabassoon), 4 horns, 3 trumpets, 3 trombones, tuba, timpani, percussion (snare drum, cymbals, bass drum, tam tam, suspended cymbals, glockenspiel), harp, celeste, strings
Approximate duration: 14 minutes

Known as the "Dean of African-American composers," William Grant Still penned over 150 works, including eight operas and five symphonies. Until the 1950s, the *Afro-American Symphony*, one of his best-known works, was the most frequently performed symphony written by an American. Born in Mississippi, he grew up in Little Rock, Arkansas, and received his college education in Ohio—first at Wilberforce University and later at Oberlin Conservatory of Music.

His *Poem for Orchestra* was written for the Cleveland Orchestra during World War II, on a commission from the Kulas American Composers' Fund. Rudolph Ringwall conducted its premiere on the third anniversary of the Pearl Harbor bombing.

According to Verna Arvey—librettist, pianist, writer, and Still's wife—this symphonic *Poem* was "inspired by the concept of a world being reborn spiritually after a period of darkness and desolation." Though the opening of the piece is dark, foreboding, and dissonant, Still's formidable melodic gifts are always at the forefront. As the music unfolds, we experience a journey from darkness into light. The final sonority is left unresolved, however. It's a strong reminder that Still, writing in 1944, was focused on hopes, not certainties.

Recommended recording: John Jeter, Fort Smith Symphony (Naxos) ↻

BÉLA BARTÓK

Born 25 March 1881; Nagyszentmiklós, Hungary (now Sînnicolau Mare, Romania)

Died 26 September 1945; New York, New York

Concerto No. 3 for Piano and Orchestra

Composed: 1945

First performance: 8 February 1946; Philadelphia, Pennsylvania

Last MSO performance: January 2016; Hans Graf, conductor;
Orli Shaham, piano

Instrumentation: 2 flutes (2nd doubling piccolo), 2 oboes (2nd doubling English horn), 2 clarinets (2nd doubling bass clarinet), 2 bassoons, 4 horns, 2 trumpets, 3 trombones, tuba, timpani, percussion (bass drum, cymbals, snare drum, tam tam, triangle, xylophone), strings

Approximate duration: 23 minutes

Bartók's third piano concerto, along with the uncompleted viola concerto, was one of the master's last compositions. It dates from 1945, his final year, when he was living in America and suffering from the polycythemia that would eventually take his life. Bartók intended the work as a gift for his wife—the gifted pianist Ditta Pásztory—on her 42nd birthday, but died on 26 September 1945 with the concerto unfinished. The composer's friend Tibor Serly completed the orchestration of the final 17 measures, drawing from Bartók's notes. The work was premiered in Philadelphia by the Hungarian pianist György Sandor, with Eugene Ormandy and the Philadelphia Orchestra, on 8 February 1946.

"Cast in a clear Mozartian mold" and "unique in Bartók's output" (Vera Lampert), the Third Concerto opens with a simple melody that conveys a distinctly Hungarian tone, a characteristic it shares with the Second Violin Concerto (1937-38). A clear texture pervades Bartók's writing, despite passages of great verve and animation, and the movement ends with brief but affecting exchange between flute and piano.

The serene second movement, marked *Adagio religioso*, contains a quotation from the "heiliger Dankgegang" (Holy Hymn of Thanks) from Beethoven's String Quartet in A minor, Op. 132. The strings begin as in Beethoven; the piano dialogues with eloquent chords. This is expressive music of the highest order. The middle section evokes night music—a genre beloved by Bartók—as the piano, oboe, clarinet, and flute exchange bird calls over string tremolos. The chorale returns as the piano offers rhapsodic commentary.

The Finale is replete with virtuosic fugal passages, but even in the most complex counterpoint, its energy is infectious. The master's shorthand instructions were all Serly needed to complete this singular work of art.

Recommended recording: Géza Anda; Ferenc Fricsay, Berlin Radio Symphony Orchestra (Deutsche Grammophon) 

PIOTR ILYICH TCHAIKOVSKY

Born 7 May 1840; Kamsko-Votkinsk, Russia

Died 6 November 1893; St. Petersburg, Russia

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

Composed: 1893

First performance: 28 October 1893; St. Petersburg, Russia

Last MSO performance: January 2016; Hans Graf, 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, tam tam), strings

Approximate duration: 46 minutes

Tchaikovsky penned his Sixth Symphony between 6 February and 31 August 1893. The work was given its first performance on 28 October of that year. The composer died nine days later; it is believed he committed suicide by ingesting arsenic.

The Sixth Symphony is Tchaikovsky's final musical utterance, one saturated with pessimism and despair. His range of expression is enormous, and the dynamics stretch from to *ppppp* to *ffff*. The first subject rises from the murky depths of the introduction. The low bassoon solo over muddy strings sounds like the beginning of Creation itself— primordial ooze coming slowly and poignantly to life. This somber tone is sustained throughout the first movement. The soaring principal theme, lovingly introduced by muted violins and cellos, is richly and expansively developed. Though the second movement's 5/4 "waltz" is, of necessity, more relaxed, it never quite loses the overall effect of melancholy—a dance for the heavy of heart, perhaps. Its contrasting trio, played over a pedal-point on D, is marked *con dolcezza e flebile*.

The Allegro molto vivace march is an orchestral tour de force, calling for dazzling virtuosity and rhythmic precision. It is a striking antipode to the symphony's final cry of despair, the Adagio lamentoso. Here, two descending melodic ideas are supported by plaintive harmonies. Tchaikovsky places the anguished climax in the middle of the movement, rather than at the end. A single soft stroke of the gong marks the point of no return, and the music slowly fades into silence as the cellos and basses have the last mournful word, retreating into the dark underworld in which the whole symphony began.

Recommended recording: Evgeny Mravinsky, Leningrad Philharmonic Orchestra
(Deutsche Grammophon) 

