

Nikolai Rimsky Korsakov:
Russian Easter Overture

Born in Tikhvin, Russia March 18, 1844; died in Luyubensk, Russia, June 21, 1908

In the Russian Orthodox church, Easter is not only celebrated on different date (usually) from that on which it is observed in the West, but also in a different way, which Rimsky-Korsakov undertook to represent in his *Russian Easter Overture*. The piece, whose actual Russian title is *Svetliy prazdnik* ("Bright Holiday"), the traditional Russian name for Easter, reflects his fascination with the legends and rituals of pagan and early Christian Russia. In place of the serenity of chaste expressions of joy we encounter in Western Easter music, there is an utterly different form of exaltation here, expressed in terms of sheer vitality and visceral excitement as well as mystery and solemnity. It is a different world, ablaze with colors and lights, set off by passages of brooding darkness. It is awesome, majestic, imposing in its austerity in one moment, and in the next bursting with a spirit of primitive energy and revelry no less dazzling than the carnival scenes in *Petrushka*. (Indeed, we might say that no work of Rimsky-Korsakov's reminds us more forcefully that he was Stravinsky's teacher.)

The work is based on actual liturgical themes which Rimsky-Korsakov found in a collection of old Russian Orthodox canticles called the *Obikhod*. As preface to the score, he quoted portions of the 68th Psalm and the 16th chapter of Mark, and added some lines of his own which make reference to a more primitive and more universal vernal symbolism, in keeping with his own basically pantheistic outlook. In his autobiography, *My Musical Life*, he provided his own comprehensive 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 dancelike 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.

The Russian Easter was the last in a series of three especially brilliant orchestral works which Rimsky introduced, in St. Petersburg concerts he conducted himself, within barely a full year—works which, unlike many of his earlier ones, he was never inclined to revise or brush up in later years. The *Capriccio espagnol*, Op. 34, received its premiere on December 17, 1887, the symphonic suite *Scheherazade*, Op. 35, on November 3, 1888, and the present work just six weeks later. These three compositions, Rimsky noted in *My Musical Life*, "close this period of my activity, at the end of which my orchestration had reached a considerable degree of virtuosity and bright sonority without Wagner's influence, within the limits of the usual make-up of Glinka's orchestra." From that point on, his creative activity was focused almost entirely on opera—in which his mastery of the orchestra was to provide him with his greatest strength.

Sergei Rachmaninov:

Piano Concerto No.3 in D minor, Opus 30

Born in Semyenovo, Russia , April 1, 1873; died in Beverly Hills California, March 28, 1943

Piano Concerto No. 3 in D Minor, Op. 30

Rachmaninoff composed this work in 1909, and was the soloist in its first performance on November 28, 1909, with the New York Symphony Society, under conductor Walter Damrosch.

In 1909, Rachmaninoff spent the summer at the Russian country estate of his wife's family preparing for his upcoming American tour, practicing and working on a third piano concerto to be unveiled at his American debut in New York. Rachmaninoff, the last in a long line of Romantic pianist/composers, was then at the peak of his powers, and was acclaimed throughout the world. A trip to America was a solid career move for any Old World virtuoso of that time—if American audiences were notoriously conservative, tours in this country were also notoriously profitable. He looked forward to his first trip to America with anticipation and some nervousness. His ocean passage to New York anything but relaxing—the ever-driven Rachmaninoff spent virtually the entire trip in his stateroom, practicing on a silent keyboard. (Stravinsky, remembering Rachmaninoff's unrelenting seriousness, once described him as a “six-and-a-half-foot-tall scowl.”) Though the premiere of his new concerto under Walter Damrosch in November was a great success, the composer remembered the second New York performance, conducted by Gustav Mahler, with special fondness. Mahler went to great lengths to perfect the complex orchestral accompaniment during a marathon rehearsal. One account of this event notes that, after the rehearsal had gone an hour and a half past its scheduled ending time, , Rachmaninoff and Mahler paused to discuss a troublesome passage. When a few brass players at the back of the room began to pack up, Mahler fixed them with a steely glare and stated: “As long as I am sitting, no musician has a right to get up.” (Union rules were different in those days...)

The D minor piano concerto has firm place in the concert repertoire as a virtuoso masterwork, and it is among the most difficult of Rachmaninoff's piano works, making sizable demands on soloist and orchestra alike. The concerto's appeal goes beyond piano pyrotechnics, however—the sumptuous themes of its three movements are subtly interrelated, imposing a kind of organic unity on this work. In the first movement (*Allegro ma non tanto*) the piano enters after only two measures of introduction, with a subdued stepwise melody. Rachmaninoff steadfastly denied that this melody was a Russian folk tune or Orthodox chant, asserting that it simply “wrote itself.” The strings introduce a more poetic second theme, which is taken up in an elaborate piano rhapsody. The movement closes with a monumental solo cadenza, which is occasionally supported by thematic fragments from the woodwinds. At the last moment, there is a brief reminiscence of the opening theme.

The opening of the *Intermezzo (Adagio)* is one of relatively few places in the concerto where the orchestra takes the lead, introducing a lush and lyrical melody. After this opening passage, however, the piano is fully in charge, spinning a free set of variations on this opening theme. The variations gather

momentum towards the end, with the soloist playing ever-more complex and chromatic figuration above occasional snippets of melody from the opening movement. After a restatement of the main theme, a suddenly aggressive piano passage and a few crisp brass chords lead directly into the *Finale (Alla breve)*. The lengthy last movement is a fiery display of piano technique. Both of its forceful themes are introduced by the soloist and elaborated upon almost solely on the piano, during a prolonged variation-style development section. An extended coda brings the concerto to an exalted conclusion in D Major.

Peter Ilyich Tchaikovsky :

Symphony No. 5 in E minor, Op. 64

Born May 7, 1840 in Votkinsk, Russia; died November 6, 1893 in St. Petersburg, Russia

Tchaikovsky was never able to maintain his self-confidence for long. Not infrequently, his opinion of a new work fluctuated between the extremes of satisfaction and denigration. The unjustly neglected *Manfred Symphony* of 1885, for example, left his pen as "the best I have ever written," but the work failed to make a good impression at its premiere, and Tchaikovsky's estimation of it tumbled. The lack of success of *Manfred* was particularly painful because he had not produced a major orchestral work since the Violin Concerto of 1878, and the score's failure left him with the gnawing worry that he might be "written out." The three years after *Manfred* were devoid of creative work.

It was not until May 1888 that Tchaikovsky again took up the challenge of the blank page. On May 27th he wrote to his brother Modeste, "To speak frankly, I feel as yet no impulse for creative work. What does this mean? Have I written myself out? No ideas, no inclination! Still, I am hoping to collect, little by little, material for a symphony." Though he was unusually secretive about the progress of this new work, he must have begun it as soon as this letter was written, since he sketched out the complete score within just six weeks. He wrote to his benefactress, Nazedha von Meck, "I am exceedingly anxious to prove to myself, as to others, that I am not played out as a composer." Tchaikovsky worked doggedly on the Symphony, ignoring illness, the premature encroachment of old age (he was only 48, but suffered from continual exhaustion and loss of vision), and his self-doubts. He pressed on, and when the orchestration was completed, by the end of August, he said, "I have not blundered; it has turned out well." His happiness in having overcome his lethargy and doubt to produce another important orchestral work was so great that he even forgot his physical ailments for a time.

Tchaikovsky's satisfaction was soon mitigated, however, by the work's premiere in St. Petersburg in 1888. Though the Symphony was applauded by the public, he felt that it was a failure; that the ovation was for his earlier pieces rather than for this new one; that the whole affair was cause for "a deep dissatisfaction with myself." Though brother Modeste was convinced that any negative reaction to the Fifth Symphony — and the critics had some — could be traced to an inadequate performance, Tchaikovsky could not be persuaded of the work's value until a performance in Hamburg early in 1889, when musicians, critics and audience were all enthusiastic about the music. Even the venerable

Johannes Brahms, who was not strongly drawn to the music of his Russian colleague, made a special effort to attend the performance on a visit to his home town. Tchaikovsky was buoyed by his reception in Hamburg, and his estimation of the Fifth Symphony (and of himself) shot up once again. The work has remained among the staples of the concert repertory.

Tchaikovsky never gave any indication that the Symphony No. 5, unlike the Fourth Symphony, had a program, though he may well have had one in mind. Years after its composition, some rough sketches that apparently refer to the Symphony No. 5 were discovered in his notebooks. They read, "Introduction. Complete resignation before Fate, or, which is the same, before the inscrutable predestination of Providence. Allegro (1) Murmurs, doubts, complaints against XXX. (2) Shall I throw myself into the embrace of faith???" The "XXX" probably referred to Tchaikovsky's homosexuality, the only matter he concealed behind secret signs in his notes and diary. If this is so, the Fifth Symphony represents Tchaikovsky's resignation to his fate in the way he could best command — music. The workings of fate were an obsessive theme with him, and the program of the earlier Fourth Symphony portrays man's happiness crushed at every turn by this great, intractable power. In their biography of the composer, Lawrence and Elisabeth Hanson reckoned Tchaikovsky's view of fate as the motivating force in the Symphony No. 5, though they distinguished its interpretation from that in the Fourth Symphony. "In the Fourth Symphony," the Hansons wrote, "the Fate theme is earthy and militant, as if the composer visualizes the implacable enemy in the form, say, of a Greek god. In the Fifth, the majestic Fate theme has been elevated far above earth, and man is seen, not as fighting a force that thinks on its own terms, of revenge, hate or spite, but a wholly spiritual power which subjects him to checks and agonies for the betterment of his soul."

The structure of the Fifth Symphony reflects this process of "betterment." It progresses from minor to major, from darkness to light, from melancholy to joy — or at least to acceptance and stoic resignation. It is the same path Beethoven blazed in his Fifth Symphony, and the power of such a musico-philosophical construction was not lost on Tchaikovsky, or on any other 19th-century musician. The sense of a perilous obstacle surmounted through struggle energizes both works, and is the substance of any "message" that Tchaikovsky may have embedded in this Symphony.

The Symphony's four movements are linked together through the use of a recurring "Fate" motto theme, given immediately at the beginning by unison clarinets as the brooding introduction to the first movement. The sonata form proper starts with a melancholy melody intoned by bassoon and clarinet over a stark string accompaniment. The woodwinds enter with wave-form scale patterns followed by a stentorian passage for the brass which leads to a climax. Several themes are presented to round out the exposition: a romantic tune, filled with emotional swells, for the strings; an aggressive strain given as a dialogue between winds and strings; and a languorous, sighing string melody. Again, the brasses are brought forth to climax this section. All of the themes are used in the development. The solo bassoon ushers in the recapitulation, and the themes from the exposition are heard again, though with changes of key and instrumentation. After a final climax in the coda, the movement fades, softer and slower, and sinks, finally, to the lowest reaches of the orchestra.

At the head of the manuscript of the second movement Tchaikovsky is said to have written, "Oh, how I love ... if you love me...." Indeed, this wonderful music calls to mind an operatic love scene.

(Tchaikovsky, it should be remembered, was a master of the musical stage who composed more operas than he did symphonies.) The opening theme, hauntingly played by the solo horn, is one of the most famous melodies in the orchestral repertory. Its expressiveness is enhanced as the movement proceeds through enriched contrapuntal lines and instrumental sonorities. Twice, the imperious Fate motto intrudes upon the starlit mood of this *romanza*.

If the second movement derives from opera, the third grows from ballet. A flowing waltz melody (inspired by a street song Tchaikovsky had heard in Italy a decade earlier) dominates much of the movement. The central trio section exhibits a scurrying figure in the strings which shows the influence of Léo Delibes, the French master of ballet music whom Tchaikovsky deeply admired. Quietly and briefly, the Fate motto returns in the movement's closing pages.

The finale begins with a long introduction based on the Fate theme cast in a heroic rather than a sinister or melancholy mood. A vigorous exposition, a concentrated development and an intense recapitulation follow. The long coda uses the motto theme in a major-key, victory-won setting. This stirring work ends with a final statement from the trumpets and horns, and closing chords from the full orchestra.