

Tampa Bay Times Masterworks

Tchaikovsky's Violin Concerto

May 24 - 26

PETER ILYICH TCHAIKOVSKY (1840-1893)

VIOLIN CONCERTO IN D MAJOR, Op. 35

Duration: ca. 33 minutes

“Surcharged emotionalism” is how the *New York Times* pinned down Tchaikovsky, a “weeping machine” who spun melody as easily as others breathe air. The most popular of the Russian composers, Tchaikovsky’s last three symphonies, *Nutcracker* and *Swan Lake* ballets, concertos, *Romeo and Juliet Fantasy Overture* and *1812 Overture* have all been box office hits for more than a century. He ranks second only to Beethoven on the playbills of American orchestras. Play him, and people will come.

It’s a cliché to tag Tchaikovsky as a bleeding-heart whose music reflects a life of paradox and angst. Rather, his best creations are marvels of musical architecture, color and dramatic tension. He created a *sui generis* world of beauty that requires no analytical homework to enjoy. Above all, he could craft a tune you can whistle leaving the concert hall.

Of Tchaikovsky’s five concertos, two are evergreen: the *First Piano Concerto* and the *Violin Concerto*. Written and orchestrated in less than a month in 1877, the *Violin Concerto* was intended for the virtuoso Leopold Auer, who read through the solo parts and deemed it unplayable. (As a historical note, the concerto’s most ardent champion in the early 20th century was Jascha Heifetz -- a student of Auer. The definitive recording, many critics agree, is Heifetz’s 1937 performance with the London Philharmonic.)

Instead, the first performance wound up in the hands of an inexperienced violinist, and things didn’t go well during the 1881 premiere with the Vienna Philharmonic. In his review, the partisan critic Eduard Hanslick drew blood: “The violin is no longer played; it is yanked about, it is torn asunder, it is beaten black and blue.” This is music, he said, that “stinks to the ear.”

The overly sensitive Tchaikovsky would never forget those words, but took comfort in the praise following performances throughout Europe. Today, Hanslick’s invective is a footnote for a concerto that stands alongside those of Beethoven, Mendelssohn, Brahms, Bruch and Sibelius.

Like the *First Piano Concerto*, this is music rich in melodrama, and it wastes no time introducing an extroverted tune. The first-movement *cadenza* is a nail-biter that demands focus and technical security from the soloist. Performers who have mastered the work love the challenge

of its finger-breaking double stops, piercing harmonics, compressed vibrato and a dynamic range that seems impossible coming from a little wooden fiddle.

The middle movement, a *canzonetta*, unfolds like an aria from an opera and requires a Mozart-like grace from both violinist and orchestra. The marking for the finale -- *allegro vivacissimo* -- is true to the letter, sending the violin scampering ahead of the orchestra as everyone meets head-on in a rousing climax.

Dmitri Shostakovich (1906-1975)

Symphony No. 5 in D Minor

Duration: ca. 44 minutes

Imagine our president storming out of an opera and denouncing the music as anti-American, then demanding an apology from the composer. Ridiculous? Well, it happened to Shostakovich in 1936 after a performance of his opera *Lady Macbeth of Mtsensk*, and served as a warning to Soviet artists.

The opera had enjoyed hundreds of performances in Russia and Europe since its premiere two years earlier, but on this night, someone special was in the audience: Joseph Stalin. He censored the opera on the grounds of “degenerate music,” oversaw a *Pravda* editorial called “Muddle instead of music,” and labeled Shostakovich as “an enemy of the people.” From there, Stalin imposed restrictions on what composers could – and could not – write.

The new criteria was direct: Composers must use Socialist themes and tonal music based on Russian folk songs and subject matter to honor the state. Shostakovich was humiliated, and from that point on was forced to write music to appease his ideological captors. Shostakovich had no choice but to concede, or face a possible stint in the gulag. “I was near to suicide,” he wrote in his memoirs. “The danger horrified me and I saw no other way out.”

By 1937, the nearly broken composer set out to prove the error of his ways with his *Fifth Symphony*, although he admitted failing to truly express himself as an artist. For the rest of his life, Shostakovich was embittered and deeply saddened, and not until later in life, after Stalin’s death in 1953, could he begin to compose with the kind of freedom for which he yearned. On the title page of the symphony, Shostakovich scrawled his now-famous words, “A Soviet artist’s practical, creative response to just criticism.”

But listeners can find ambiguities in the symphony that make it anything but a cave-in to Soviet pressure. The historian Boris Gasparov has said the work in fact “possesses an intense inner life; the very pain inflicted upon (Shostakovich) confirms his humanity, because he responds to it with meditation and mourning, not with Pavlovian reactive impulses.” In essence, the *Fifth Symphony* is about man’s struggle against insurmountable odds, but a struggle of pride and determination.

This great work culminates Shostakovich's experiments with large-scale sonata form (introduction, development and recapitulation of a musical idea) and the opening movement serves as a huge archway that beckons the listener to enter. The effect of the initial, menacing theme, tossed back and forth between violins and lower strings, jabs like a knife and forms the foundation on which the entire symphony is built.

The second movement is a rousing march full of biting Mahler-like sarcasm. The sprawling *largo* that follows is serene and introspective, and ends with a plaintive oboe singing one of Shostakovich's loveliest melodies. Then comes the finale, a series of barbaric, timpani-infused climaxes that give way to a bittersweet duet between harp and celeste. Listen carefully for the influence of the medieval *Dies irae* (*Day of Wrath*) before the symphony ends with a heroic theme announced by the brass.

"I think it is clear to everyone what happens in the *w*," Shostakovich once said about his musical reaction to Stalin's oppression. "The rejoicing is forced, created under threat. The finale is irreparable tragedy. People who came to the premiere of the *Fifth* in the best of moods, wept."

Quarter note: This was the first symphony ever played by TFO (then known as the Florida West Coast Symphony) during its inaugural concert at McKay Auditorium at the University of Tampa in 1968.

Program notes by Kurt Loft, a freelance writer and former music critic for The Tampa Tribune.