

Tampa Bay Times Masterworks

## Winter Dreams: Tchaikovsky & Sibelius

Nov 15 & 16, 2019

### VIVIAN FUNG (1975- )

#### FANFARE

Duration: ca. 6 minutes

Designing a concert program, much less a full season, is a test for any conductor. Do you match pieces for their similarities or contrasts, challenge listeners with the modern or rely on the familiar? For Daniel Black, TFO's associate conductor who leads this weekend's Masterworks concerts, it was about a natural link connecting works by Fung, Sibelius and Tchaikovsky.

"I think of each of these works as having something of a landscape quality," Black said. "There's something epic about all three, like a wide shot in film."

The program opens with its first performance of a work by a Canadian-born composer with a deep interest in exploring cultures, minority music and exotic sounds. Fung has immersed herself in the music of China, North Vietnam, Spain and Indonesia, and is currently writing a new opera based on her time in Cambodia. Fung's *Violin Concerto* earned her the 2013 Juno Award for classical composition of the year in Canada.

Fung's sense of humor shines in the names she gives her works, such as *Earworms*, *Graffiti Mashup*, *Dust Devils*, and *Gamelan Grunge*. She writes with apparent ease, having published 40 compositions in the last decade, including a piece for full orchestra called *Fanfare*, which she completed in 2014. Originally called *Fanfare for McElroy*, it celebrates the 40-year career of John McElroy, who at the time was retiring as principal trumpet for the Alabama Symphony Orchestra.

"Although the title is *Fanfare*, this piece is quite a departure from what you might expect from such a title," Black said. "It's contemplative and almost introverted at times, and contains extensive, expressive solos for the trumpet."

Fung describes *Fanfare* as more inward than outward, with a fiery opening and a reserved close: "After the opening orchestral burst of color, the work settles on a brass chorale, decorated with flourishes from strings and woodwinds. The chorale is then transferred into the strings, and slowly builds into a spectacular display from the solo brass section and then the percussion section. Soft string harmonics and piano interjections set the mood for the final section, marked *Majestic and Nostalgic*, which features a trumpet solo to end the work."

### JEAN SIBELIUS (1865-1957)

#### VIOLIN CONCERTO

Duration: ca. 30 minutes

Sibelius covered a lot of musical ground. He was born when the first ship passed through the Suez Canal and died the year Elvis released *Jail House Rock*. But given his long life, his absence from the musical

scene is something of a paradox, considering that a composer of such genius would, presumably, continue to evolve and engage an admiring public. Instead, Sibelius retired in 1929 at the height of his powers, living another three decades on a government stipend, without composing or conducting. Some biographers attribute the end of his creative energies to an addiction he battled most of his life.

“My drinking has genuine roots that are both dangerous and go deep,” he admitted. Still, Sibelius was prolific during his best years: 130 piano pieces, more than 100 songs, seven symphonies, tone poems, chamber music, and ballet scores.

His *Violin Concerto* is a masterpiece and revered by concert violinists for more than a century. Sibelius composed this lushly romantic work between serious bouts of darkness in his life, one reason for its often-stalled progress and completion. Friends literally had to drag Sibelius out of pubs so he could work on the final movement and prepare for the premiere in 1905, which fell flat at first performance, in part because soloist and orchestra never found an agreeable union in so many taxing passages. So Sibelius worked on improving the score, cutting out much of the fat, and giving us a concerto that ranks alongside those by Brahms, Tchaikovsky and Bruch.

“Despite that Sibelius was himself a violinist,” said TFO Associate Conductor Daniel Black, “it took a lot of revisions to get to the piece we now admire as one of the finest violin concertos ever written.”

The concerto is in many ways a subtle work, one more graceful than gregarious, but deeply expressive. Cast in the key of D minor, it opens with an impassioned allegro that overwhelms in length the two movements that follow. The development of the opening holds listeners in hushed rapture, the music a mix of foreboding and delicate sweetness, before the soloist performs a large cadenza – a virtuosic improvisation. A short second movement plays out in the form of an extended song, and the finale counters with a festive dance. The voice of the solo violin never leaves center stage; it remains prominent through all three movements, even to the point of dominating the orchestra

### **PETER ILYICH TCHAIKOVSKY (1840-1893)**

#### **SYMPHONY NO. 1, WINTER DREAMS**

Duration: ca. 44 minutes

Tchaikovsky has been called the quintessential tragic artist. Hypersensitive, plagued with creative doubt, sexually frustrated, fatalistic, self-loathing, and a musical genius, he has become the poster child for emotive romanticism. He ranks with Beethoven and Rachmaninoff as the most played composers in the repertoire of orchestras, and his last three symphonies, concertos, ballet scores, and tone poems continue to prove their worth at the box office.

Tchaikovsky called his *First Symphony*, subtitled *Winter Dreams*, “immature,” and “a sin of my sweet youth.” Although not as popular as his last three symphonies, *Winter Dreams* reveals much about the compositional process, said Daniel Black, TFO’s associate conductor.

“It doesn't get nearly as much attention as his later symphonies, but it was this work which helped launch his career,” Black said. “In contrast to his violently passionate later works, this is a symphony that owes as much to Mendelssohn as Beethoven, and shows Tchaikovsky when he was still young, fresh out of the conservatory, and with his whole life and career still in front of him. It's a work of inspiration and freshness.”

However, the music did not come easy for him, and his letters reveal his sleepless nights, depression and fear of dying before he could complete the work. Stung by earlier criticism, he lacked the confidence that would come later: "I am sterile, I am a nonentity," he wrote. "Nothing will ever come of me, I have no talent."

The 26-year-old composer cast the symphony in four movements and gave program titles to the first two – *Dreams of a Winter Journey* and *Land of desolation, land of mists*, respectively. Oddly, it was not presented as a complete work, but in pieces: The scherzo was played by a Moscow orchestra in 1866 and the adagio two months later. After many revisions and corrected editions, the final version – the one you will hear tonight – was ready two decades after Tchaikovsky began his initial sketches.

*Winter Dreams* opens with trembling strings as flute and bassoon introduce the main subject, followed by a new theme on the clarinet. However immature Tchaikovsky believed it to be, the structure is remarkably solid, with a delicate tension reminiscent of Mendelssohn. A poignant adagio serves as the heart of the work, followed by a third movement built off themes from an early piano sonata. The finale opens with a moody theme based on a Russian folk song, which takes flight as the entire orchestra dives through fugal passages – in contrasting keys – and a flourish of timpani strokes and blaring brass.

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