

TAMPA BAY TIMES MASTERWORKS

Tchaikovsky's Piano Concerto No. 1

WITH STRAVINSKY'S THE FIREBIRD

Feb 19 & 20, 2022

Eric A. Heumann (1992-)**The War in Heaven**

Duration: ca. 6 minutes

Composers have always relied on commissions and contests for support, and Eric Heumann was thrilled to have been chosen as winner of TFO's 2019 Student Composer Competition. His new work, *The War in Heaven*, was set for a premiere in 2020, but Covid delayed that much-awaited program until now.

"I'm overjoyed to be attending the premiere," Heumann said. "I'm especially glad to hear this work performed by TFO, an orchestra of such high caliber. This is one of the largest pieces I have ever composed, and to hear it come to life, with live instruments, is a dream come true. While Covid obviously delayed the performance by nearly two years, it will be worth the wait once I finally get to hear it."

Heumann, who lives in Ocala with his wife, mezzo-soprano Emily Heumann, said the six-minute work was inspired by the 250th anniversary of Beethoven's birth in 2020. It fuses together two unique aspects of his music: the religious underpinnings of his sacred pieces, such as the *Mass in C*, and the rhythmic vitality of his *Ninth Symphony*.

"Musically, I have always been drawn to the way Beethoven uses rhythms, both straight and with syncopation," he said. "In the third movement of his *Ninth Symphony*, Beethoven uses primarily straight-forward rhythms but with a driving and exhilarating character. In the finale, syncopation becomes a huge compositional tool that drives the whole symphony to a close."

The work's program element comes from Chapter 12 of the Book of Revelation. Here, a dragon (Satan), follows Jesus into Heaven after he ascends from Earth. The angels in Heaven, led by the archangel Michael, fight the dragon and send it back to Earth. The dragon then seeks to ruin the Earth, but the people prevail.

The music unfolds in three connected sections, at first slow and stately, followed by a menacing bassoon representing the dragon, then a cascade of driving rhythms that create the feeling of war. The final part delivers a triumphant melody in the brass as the angels celebrate their victory over evil.

Peter Ilych Tchaikovsky (1840-1893)**Piano Concerto No. 1 in B Flat, Op. 23**

Duration: ca. 32 minutes

Some of you may remember, during TFO's 2006 season, the much-awaited appearance by Van Cliburn, who soared to stardom in 1953 by taking first prize at the inaugural International Tchaikovsky Piano Competition in Moscow. In a stunning Cold War coup, the 23-year-old delivered a knock-out performance of the name-sake composer's *Piano Concerto No. 1*, and for the rest of his life – he died in 2013 – Cliburn was known as

the Texan who conquered Russia.

So to watch the lanky, 72-year-old musician bang out those famous first chords as he sat at a Steinway at Mahaffey Theater was a treat, given his inexorable connection to a work he never seemed to tire of playing.

“It’s fresh every time you hear it or study it,” he told the *Tampa Tribune* before his performance back then. “When I practice, it’s always with the music. When I follow the pages, invariably I will find something new. That’s the test of a masterpiece.”

For some listeners, this evergreen concerto is overplayed and overwrought. For others, it never fails to thrill with its rhythmic flourish, heroic thrust and intoxicating colors. No, Tchaikovsky wasn’t subtle, and the supercharged, pulsating sentiment of this work continues to sell tickets nearly 150 years after its premiere.

The granddaddy of warhorses opens with one of the best-known passages in music: a series of massive brass chords that usher in the piano at full-throttle. After the rousing introduction, a wave of melody envelops the listener, and the pianist engages in some brilliant passage work that is, surprisingly, quickly discarded and never developed. The entire first movement is more of a free style rhapsody than in the traditional sonata form of most 19th-century concertos.

While an athletic cadenza secures the opening movement with lots of excitement, the lyrical andantino ushers in the pure sound of the solo flute and plucked strings, a study in poise and restraint. The finale bursts forward as a rousing Cossack dance, a thrilling apotheosis that demands the most of soloist and orchestra – and almost always compels the audience to jump it their feet.

“It’s a piece I haven’t conducted all that much, but it’s certainly iconic with that grand opening melody,” said TFO Music Director Michael Francis. “It might be overplayed, but it’s wonderful music, as Tchaikovsky had such a gift for melody. The sing-ability factor is epic and you feel a deep sense of him in this music.”

The concerto is a cornerstone of the repertoire today, but it got off to an inauspicious start when the prominent pianist Nikolai Rubinstein called it “utterly worthless, absolutely unplayable.” Rubinstein’s rebuke was shortsighted. A sensation after its world premiere in Boston in 1875, it was chosen as the first concerto to be performed at the new Carnegie Hall six years later. The rest, as they say, is music history.

Igor Stravinsky (1882-1971)
The Firebird (complete) 1945

Duration: ca. 45 minutes

Like his contemporary Pablo Picasso, Stravinsky sought a form of expression that forced people to question the role and meaning of art. In his early Russian period, he bathed listeners in the warmth of such nationalistic classics as *The Firebird*. But with the *Rite of Spring*, he confounded notions of tonality and rules, setting fire to convention, and creating – literally – a riot at its first performance in Paris in 1913.

From there, Stravinsky continued to push the envelope, developing a language that could be both austere and elevated. His music moved from the early Russian influence to the neo-classical to the serial (12-tone), and although he never stopped looking for new forms and avenues of expression, he slowly lost alliance with audiences. The later, “difficult” Stravinsky was admired but seldom loved. Despite his reputation as

an *enfant terrible*, it was the early, more accessible works that endeared Stravinsky to audiences.

Of his three great ballet scores – *Firebird*, *Petrushka*, and *Rite* – the first is the most luminous and tonally brilliant. The ballet is based on a fairy tale about a mystical firebird that offers a magic feather to its captor, Prince Ivan, who in a moment of compassion sets the bird free. Omens of doom come to Kashchey the Immortal and his band of evil ghouls, who clash with Ivan. Throughout the score, listeners will hear shades of Nikolay Rimsky-Korsakov, whose influence on exotic coloring and chromaticism runs deep in Stravinsky’s music.

“*The Firebird* was a magical concoction,” notes Alex Ross in his 2007 book *The Rest is Noise: Listening to the 20th Century*. “Russian musical sorcery, overlaid with French effects, lit up by the X-factor of Stravinsky’s talent.”

It was to be Stravinsky’s last foray into this sumptuous style of music-making. Originally composed in 1910 for Serge Diaghilev’s fusion of art forms, the Ballet Russes, *The Firebird* is most often heard as one of three condensed suites Stravinsky arranged in 1911, 1919, and 1945. But TFO Music Director Michael Francis pulls out all the stops in this weekend’s performances, which include all 22 sections of the original ballet.

“*Firebird* is such deeply satisfying music,” he said, “and the full score is so much better than the suites.”

The Firebird turned Stravinsky into an instant celebrity (he has a star on the Hollywood Walk of Fame), and Diaghilev knew he had his man for future collaborations. From start to finish, the music grips the listeners with exoticism and biting rhythms that Stravinsky would further develop in revolutionary ways in *Petrushka* and *Rite*.

Most all the short sections that make up the full score can stand alone as orchestral miniatures, notably the electrifying *Infernal Dance*. The finale is one of music’s most hair-raising crescendos, a tour-de-force designed to shake the rafters of any concert hall. Audiophile showrooms used to play this section to impress customers, and in the 1980s the progressive rock group Yes used the music to open its arena concerts.

Program notes by Kurt Loft, a St. Petersburg-based writer and former music critic for The Tampa Tribune.