

TAMPA BAY TIMES MASTERWORKS

# Tchaikovsky's Symphony No. 5

WITH BENJAMIN GROSVENOR ON PROKOFIEV

May 21 & 22, 2022

**Ahmed Al Abaca (1984- )**

***Ode to Liberty (world premiere)***

Duration: ca. 10 minutes

Ahmed Al Abaca is not a composer who looks through music's rose-colored lens and depicts life in a bright and happy major key. An artist should, Al Abaca believes, capture our pain points and challenges, even at their most distasteful and shocking.

We heard this clearly last year when TFO performed *Across the Calm Waters of Heaven – A Piece for Peace*, a musical transformation of horror into hope following the 2015 shooting in San Bernardino, Calif., that killed 14 people and wounded many more. The piece depicts the mixed feelings of loss and anticipation felt by the victims as they left Earth and began their ascension into the love and care of a new eternal home.

Now, in the wake of another form of aggression, Al Abaca turns to the subject of freedom in a freshly composed piece called *Ode to Liberty*, which was commissioned by TFO. Music Director Michael Francis leads the musicians in the first-ever performances May 21-22, along with works by Prokofiev and Tchaikovsky.

When the orchestra asked Al Abaca to write something original to close the season, the first task was to mold it into the program Francis designed.

“And I saw they were performing an all-Russian concert,” Al Abaca said. “Both are very influential composers to me, so I wanted to write something around that Russian sound, that Eastern European sound.”

Al Abaca also wanted to find a story that touched on being an African-American, and in the relationship between personal heritage and Russian culture. The connection came in the poetry of Alexander Pushkin, a Russian of distant African ancestry who lived as a white man.

Pushkin is a giant in Russian literature and theater, but his short career – he was mortally wounded in a duel – wasn't without political controversy. When he read his *Ode to Liberty* in public in 1825, Tsar Alexander banished him from St. Petersburg to a remote part of Russia for six years. Al Abaca saw the repression of free speech then, as it is now in many countries, as full of musical potential.

“I was reading through his works and found the *Ode to Liberty* poem, and it just struck me as being so relevant today,” the composer added. “I thought, this is my lane and I love wherever this is going to go. So I began writing a five-movement, episodic piece that hit each beat in the poem.”

Al Abaca wrote much of the music before the Russian invasion of Ukraine on Feb. 24, and then revised it – on a tight deadline – to reflect the impact of events that had just transpired. The titled movements, with tempo markings, are:

1. *I Sing of Freedom's Victorious Fire* (moderato processionale)
2. *Thou Inspired Hymns Audacious* (allegro furioso)
3. *But Woe Betide the Commonwealth* (andante empatico)
4. *The Thoughtful Singer's Gaze* (adagio con moto)
5. *The People Joyous, Their Freedom Vernal* (allegro triumphant)

Everyone attending the TFO performances will hear the work for the first time. Francis believes Al Abaca's "immediacy" and artistic reaction to global turmoil is both exciting and critical.

"This was an opportunity for him to write something new for us," Francis said. "Ahmed is an important American composer with powerful ideas, so this is a wonderful chance to end the season on a special note."

### **Sergei Prokofiev (1891-1953)**

#### ***Concerto for Piano No. 3 in C major, Op.26***

Duration: ca. 26 minutes

Prokofiev's *Third Piano Concerto* is a virtuosic showpiece that unfolds as brazenly raw and exposed, prickly and complex, introspective and economical. Packing these qualities together in a concert is a test for young pianists who choose it as a vehicle to enter their profession or to impress listeners with their knife-sharpening skills as they mature.

Such was the case in 2000, as TFO patrons might remember, when a young Chinese artist named Lang Lang delighted audiences with his keyboard chops. Fast forward two decades later, and the challenges of this daring work will keep the British pianist Benjamin Grosvenor on alert in this final Masterworks program under the baton of Music Director Michael Francis.

The concerto may be a century old, but in many ways it feels like a strikingly modern piece. Grosvenor doesn't believe listeners will struggle with it at all.

"I don't think so because it's an incredibly spirited work with a great energy to it and actually very approachable for audiences of all ages," said the 29-year-old pianist from Westcliff-on-Sea, just east of London. "Performing it live is a thrill – it's a real ensemble piece with the orchestra, making it all the more fun to play."

Grosvenor has been turning heads since he began studying piano at age 6, and then at 18 after winning the keyboard final in the 2004 BBC Young Musicians Competition. He keeps a handful of concertos in his back pocket, and enjoys the Prokofiev for the sweat equity it demands.

"It's a tour de force for the piano, but Prokofiev writes so beautifully for the instrument and it really is a joy to play," he said. "This piece takes on another dimension when you put it together with the orchestra, as the writing for everyone is so colorful and inventive, and every part is integral to the fabric of the work."

The concerto is symmetrical in that all three movements are roughly the same length, about 10 minutes each. But the balance ends there. A sense of forward motion drives the lyrical first movement, which opens quietly with a sweet clarinet melody, the soloist jumping in with the first subject and blazing through a tumultuous orchestral thicket that ends with a comic thump.

In the andantino that follows Prokofiev introduces a theme with five variations, the myriad tempo changes

pushing the pianist to a physical limit. The hand movements alone are a choreographic marvel, worthy of a Balanchine ballet atop a keyboard. The finale unfolds as a traditional rondo – statement and restatement – and the orchestra builds so much energy as to compete with rather than complement the soloist. In the end, both parties shake hands in a rousing coda.

The concerto embraces all of Prokofiev’s “phases,” or musical characteristics, in being traditional, innovative, precise, lyrical and comic. The music writer and author David Dubal has called it “a perfect score” that fuses “classical form, motoric energy, Russian melody, pungent harmony, wit, and gaiety into a gorgeous orchestral frame.”

### **Peter Ilyich Tchaikovsky, (1840-1893)**

#### ***Symphony No. 5 in E Minor, Op. 64***

Duration: ca. 44 minutes

On the freezing night of Oct. 20, 1941, the German army surrounded Leningrad, laying much of the city to waste through insistent barrages, cutting off its residents from food and supplies.

But even as bombs exploded nearby, the Leningrad Radio Symphony Orchestra continued its performance of Tchaikovsky’s *Symphony No. 5*, managing to finish all four movements without noticeable distraction. With its underlying theme of victory through strife, the music stole the hearts of the audience that night at Philharmonic Hall, as well as many Londoners listening to a radio broadcast.

Attached to supreme musical technique, Tchaikovsky’s brand of emotionalism has been a powerful tonic, one reason his music stays at the center of the repertoire. The last three symphonies, concertos, ballet scores, and tone poems are universal brands, and continue to prove their worth at the box office.

The *Fifth Symphony* has no links to literary or non-musical ideas, but makes use of a cyclical theme to connect all four movements. After finishing it in 1888, Tchaikovsky was typically moribund: “I have become convinced that the symphony is unsuccessful. There is something repellent about it, a certain patchiness, insecurity and artifice. All this causes me a deep torment of discontent.”

Of course, Tchaikovsky couldn’t have been more mistaken about his latest creation, and today the work is often defended as a serious masterpiece *despite* its popularity.

The opening development carries a dark mood that leads to turmoil, and is the only part of the symphony where Tchaikovsky left a program note: “Complete resignation before Fate, or, before the inscrutable designs of Providence.” The cascading themes that follow show the composer’s brilliance as an orchestrator.

Then, in the beautiful cantabile movement, Tchaikovsky introduces one of his most magical melodies, issued by the French horns (fans of John Denver may note a similarity between this theme and *Annie’s Song*). A light waltz carries the third movement, with some orchestral fluttering reminiscent of *The Nutcracker*, and marks the first time a waltz has replaced the traditional scherzo in a symphony.

In the finale, a motto from earlier in the work reappears, a stentorian theme played by the lower strings. Here, Tchaikovsky sheds his cloak of gloom and embraces the light. The symphony shifts from the home key of E minor to the radiant major, and builds a propulsive crescendo so common in his best-loved works.

“This symphony, with its fatalistically doomed opening, the repression in the air, and right through to the final victory, makes it one of the finest of all musical journeys,” said TFO Music Director Michael Francis.

***Program notes by Kurt Loft, a St. Petersburg-based writer, member of the Music Critics Association of North America, and former music critic for The Tampa Tribune.***