

Program Page

HOUGH FAMILY FOUNDATION MASTERWORKS

Tchaikovsky's Symphony No. 4

Michael Francis, *Conductor*
Jeffrey Multer, *Violin*

Friday, December 2, 2022, Straz Center - Ferguson Hall at 8:00
Saturday, December 3, 2022, Mahaffey Theater at 8:00 pm
Sunday, December 4, 2022, Mahaffey Theater at 2:00 pm

Grace Williams
(1906-1977)

Michael Ippolito
(b. 1985)

Peter I. Tchaikovsky
(1840-1893)

Elegy [1936] 🎵

Violin Concerto [2022] world premiere
Jeffrey Multer, *Violin*

Intermission

Symphony No. 4 in F minor, Op.36

- I. Andante sostenuto
- II. Andantino in modo di canzona
- III. Scherzo: Pizzicato ostinato
- IV. Finale: Allegro con fuoco

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Grace Williams (1906-1977)

Elegy

Duration: ca. 11 minutes

In its continued focus on the works of women composers – including Clara Schumann and Jessie Montgomery this season – TFO turns its attention to a neglected talent who for years struggled to be heard outside her native Wales. Grace Mary Williams is hardly a household name, even a half-century after her death, but her small cache of works deserves our open ears and more frequent performances.

Both Williams' parents were schoolteachers who loved music and exposed their daughter to live instruments and recordings at home. She played violin in a trio with her father and brother and entertained herself by listening to music on the family's primitive phonograph.

Musical studies in Wales, however, were unfulfilling, and in 1926, she moved to London to attend the Royal Academy of Music, where she took classes under the great English composer Ralph Vaughan Williams. During her years at the Academy, she met a small group of women composers, and they soon formed a bond, encouraging and criticizing each other's work.

Throughout her career, she worked on numerous commissions, and wrote two symphonies, three concertos, an opera, a mass and songs based on traditional Welsh tunes. In 1949, she became the first British woman to compose a feature film score, for the movie *Blue Scar*.

The deeply evocative *Elegy*, written in 1936, shares the mood of Vaughan Williams and even Richard Strauss, but is entirely her own. The work opens in a mist of melancholy in the lower strings before violins join in and expand the harmony. A solo violin appears from above like an anguished cry, then trails off into a receding tide of sound.

The music is modest and follows a simple path, but Williams' skill in creating tension and release adds poignancy in much the way Samuel Barber did with his iconic *Adagio for Strings* of the same year.

Michael Ippolito (1985-)

Violin Concerto (world premiere)

Duration: ca. 24 minutes

A graduate of Brandon High School just east of Tampa, Michael Ippolito has been crafting new music since he was a kid. At 15, his portfolio included an impressive *Rhapsodie Pathétique*, which was played by the Tampa Bay Youth Orchestra. Three years later, TFO offered the premiere of another original work, *Waltz*.

He went on to study at the Juilliard School in New York and the Cincinnati College-Conservatory of Music. His work soon caught the ear of music directors with regional and major orchestras in the United States, winning prestigious awards from the American Academy of Arts and Letters, Juilliard and ASCAP. Today, he teaches music composition at Texas State University in San Marcos.

For its 50th anniversary season in 2018, TFO commissioned him to write a new work, which became his 24-minute *Triptych*. Audiences heard another Ippolito piece last year when Music Director Michael Francis conducted the world premiere of *A la finestra*. For this new season, it started with interest from concertmaster Jeffrey Multer for Ippolito to write a concerto for the violin, and the young composer didn't disappoint.

In thinking about its structure, Ippolito looked at the concerto in its historical context as a heroic narrative, with the soloist as the protagonist in an imaginary story, either collaborating with or battling against the orchestra. He immersed himself in ancient Greek epics and mythology, and saw a potential path for the music: "To simultaneously embrace epic storytelling," he said, "while also undermining it."

The *Violin Concerto* is in two parts. The first is titled *Rhapsodos*, an epic told from the personal, hero-centered point of view. In ancient Greece, a rhapsode was a reciter of poetry who stitched together songs. “In this movement, the solo violin is the storyteller who embodies the hero, enchanting us with their triumphs and tragedies,” Ippolito said.

The second movement, titled *Moirai*, refers to the fates – the three sister goddesses who determine the destinies of all mortals. The sister’s names are Clotho (who spins the thread of life), Lachesis (who measures each person’s allotment), and Atropos (who cuts the thread at the end of life). In contrast to the heroic narrative, Ippolito said the *Moirai* would have a detached and impersonal attitude to any epic story; to them, there’s no such thing as a triumph or tragedy – there is simply what is.

“In this movement, the solo violin begins with Clotho’s music, evocative of spinning thread,” he said. “The music of Lachesis is represented first with a passacaglia, a strict form, or way of measuring time. The spinning music returns before a massive fugue brings together all the themes from the concerto, another strict form that ‘measures’ the protagonist’s life. In the final moments, the soloist attempts to defy fate, before the final snip of Atropos’ scissors.”

Peter Ilyich Tchaikovsky (1840-1893)

Symphony No. 4 in F Minor, Op. 36

Duration: ca. 44 minutes

It’s a cliché to tag Tchaikovsky a neurotic whose music reflects a life of paradox and angst. Rather, his best creations are marvels of musical architecture, color and dramatic tension that were formed by a logical, if brazenly creative, mind. Like Van Gogh, he struggled with depression, but found beauty amid the anguish.

His *sui generis* musical world requires no homework to enjoy. His scores are canvases drenched in an ever-changing spectrum of color, and his melody is the light that illuminates them. It didn’t hurt to be a master craftsman of the highest order.

The most popular of all Russian composers, Tchaikovsky’s last three symphonies, *Nutcracker* and *Swan Lake* ballets, concertos, *Romeo and Juliet* fantasy overture and *1812* have been box office hits since their inception. He ranks second only to Beethoven on the playbills of American orchestras. Play him, and people will come.

The *Symphony No. 4* is his most integrated large orchestral work, and like Beethoven’s *Fifth*, an explosive tribute to fate. But symbolisms and similarities end there. The danger in “interpreting” this otherwise absolute music is to assign it a storyline, and for more than a century musicians and writers have loosely based their perceptions on a letter Tchaikovsky wrote about the piece.

He later rejected his description, saying “This is the first time in my life that I have tried to transpose ideas and images into words and I have certainly not been successful.” He stressed that the *Fourth* follows no literary program, but instead stands alone as “a pure symphony.”

The arresting opening movement, with its barrage of horns, comes off as a violent waltz, and remains the most complex section of the entire work. A flowing andante follows, and soothes the nervous strains that preceded it. The third movement is one of the most novel in all music, as the strings play it almost entirely in pizzicato.

Any listener who happens to be dozing off at this point will be rudely awakened by the thunderclap that opens the finale, marked *Allegro con fuoco* (with fire). This whirlwind of a movement cites the original fate theme, and an explosion of horns and harmonic convulsions turn this section into a virtuosic concerto for the entire orchestra.

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