Program Page

HOUGH FAMILY FOUNDATION MASTERWORKS

Tchaikovsky's Piano Concerto No. 1

Michael Francis, *Conductor*
Olga Kern, *Piano*
Donnie Ray Albert, *Baritone*
The Master Chorale of Tampa Bay; Matthew Abernathy, *Artistic Director*

Saturday, Feb 22, 2025, Mahaffey Theater at 8:00 pm
Saturday, Feb 23, 2025, Mahaffey Theater at 2:00 pm

Piotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky
(1840-1893)

Piano Concerto No. 1 in B-flat minor, Op.23

I. Allegro non troppo e molto maestoso
II. Andantino semplice
III. Allegro con fuoco

Olga Kern, *piano*

Intermission

William Walton
(1902-1983)

Belshazzar's Feast

1. Thus Spake Isaiah
2. If I Forget Thee
3. Babylon Was a Great City
4. In Babylon Belshazzar the King
5. Praise Ye the God of Gold
6. Thus in Babylon, the Mighty City
7. And in That Same Hour
8. Then Sing Aloud to God Our Strength
9. The Trumpeters and Pipers
10. Then Sing Aloud to God Our Strength

Olga Kern plays the Steinway Piano from the Music Gallery, exclusive agents for Steinway & Sons.

With gratitude to Dr. Gordon Gilbert and Michele Gilbert, generous patrons, donors and sponsors of this concert.

This concert is part of The St. Petersburg Celebration of the Arts.

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Peter Ilych Tchaikovsky (1840-1893)
Piano Concerto No. 1 in B Flat, Op. 23
Duration: ca. 32 minutes

What to listen for:

• Tchaikovsky hints at Russian folk tunes throughout the concerto, including a lively Cossack dance in the finale.

"Utterly worthless, absolutely unplayable – the piece as a whole is bad, trivial, vulgar."

It's hard to imagine these words describing Tchaikovsky's First Piano Concerto, one of the most-performed works in the classical canon. But Nikolai Rubinstein, the famed pianist to whom Tchaikovsky dedicated the piece, didn't hold back his dislike for what today remains at center stage in concert halls worldwide.

It got off to an inauspicious start in the winter of 1874. Tchaikovsky knew his piano skills were limited, so he sought the advice of Rubinstein, a close friend, expecting encouragement. Instead, he was broadsided, and stormed from the room, quickly replacing Rubinstein's name with the pianist and conductor Hans von Bulow.

As we know, the criticism was shortsighted: Following its world premiere in Boston on Oct. 25, 1875, the concerto became an overnight sensation, and in 1958 was the first piece of classical music to sell a million records. That was the year a young Texan named Van Cliburn soared to stardom 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 punch of the namesake composer's Piano Concerto No. 1, which he performed for the rest of his life.

"It's fresh every time you hear it or study it," he told the Tampa Tribune before a 2006 appearance with TFO in the work. "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 embraceable tunes and striking rhythmic flourish. No, Tchaikovsky wasn't subtle, and the supercharged, pulsating sentiment of the music pleases both the ear – and the box office.

The concerto opens with one of the most celebrated passages in music: a series of massive brass chords that usher in the piano in thundering octaves. After this majestic introduction, a wave of melody envelops the listener, and the pianist engages in some brilliant passage work that is, surprisingly, discarded and never developed. The entire first movement is more of a freestyle rhapsody than in the traditional sonata form that guides most 19th-century concertos.

While an athletic cadenza secures the opening movement, the lyrical andantino ushers in the organic sound of the solo flute and plucked strings – a model of poise. The melody comes from the French song Il faut s'amuser, danser et rire, a favorite of Tchaikovsky's only fiancée. The finale – marked fast with fire – bursts forward as a rousing Cossack dance, a thrilling apotheosis that demands the most of soloist and orchestra – and compels an audience to jump to its feet.

"It's the ultimate Romantic-era piano concerto, and certainly iconic with that grand opening melody,'' said TFO Music Director Michael Francis. "It might be overplayed, but just wonderful music, as Tchaikovsky had such a gift for melody, and you feel a deep sense of him in this music.''

William Walton (1902-1983)
Belshazzar's Feast
Duration: ca. 36 minutes

What to listen for:

• Note how both orchestra and chorus perform as virtuoso instruments, full of striking gestures and edgy rhythms that make this music a sonic powerhouse.

The music of English composer William Walton is seldom heard in American concert halls today, and performances of his Viola Concerto or First Symphony can be considered rare treats by any standard. He may be better known, albeit indirectly, through his 28 film scores, including As You Like It (1936), Hamlet (1948), and Richard III (1955).

The self-deprecating Walton did little to promote himself, and when asked why her husband wrote so little in the last decades of his life, his wife answered, “William doesn’t really like music that much.’’ To which Walton replied, “I don’t. It irritates me to madness, especially my own.’’

But Walton was proud of what would be the summa among his nearly 75 creations, the brilliant cantata Belshazzar’s Feast for orchestra, chorus and baritone soloist. First performed at the Leeds Festival in 1931, this dramatization of the Book of Daniel and Psalm 137 depicts the sacrilege of the eponymous Babylonian king, whose death brings freedom for the Jews.

A supreme achievement for voices, the cantata also makes imaginative use of jazzy rhythms and massed brass, giving the music a distinctive edge. When Walton learned that the Berlioz Requiem, with its huge orchestra, was being performed at the same Leeds festival, he asked the conductor, Thomas Beecham, if he could borrow additional brass players for his cantata. The maestro responded: “You might as well use everything available. You’ll never hear the piece again.’’

Beecham’s sarcasm was shortsighted, as Belshazzar’s Feast became a repertoire staple in 1958, when a first recording spread the word of something intense and arresting, not unlike Carl Orff’s Carmina Burana.

The piece describes Isaiah’s prophesy of the Jews as captives in Babylon and their sorrowful lament; the glories of a great city; the debauchery of King Belshazzar’s great feast and the disrespect for the Jews’ holy vessels; a procession of the gods; the writing on the wall; the murder of the King; and a celebration of the divided city through a series of concluding Alleluias.

The music is cast in one continuous movement but in sections that include:

1. Thus Spake Isaiah

2. If I Forget Thee

3. Babylon Was a Great City

4. In Babylon Belshazzar the King

5. Praise Ye the God of Gold

6. Thus in Babylon, the Mighty City

7. And in That Same Hour

8. Then Sing Aloud to God Our Strength

9. The Trumpeters and Pipers

10. Then Sing Aloud to God Our Strength

“Belshazzar’s Feast is incredibly dramatic, with a massive choir and orchestra,’’ TFO Music Director Michael Francis said. “It’s a huge, epic piece that will bring the house down.’’

Program notes by Kurt Loft, a journalist and arts writer who has covered classical music in Florida for more than 40 years. A member of the Music Critics Association of North America, he lives in St. Petersburg.