PROGRAM PAGE

HOUGH FAMILY FOUNDATION MASTERWORKS

TCHAIKOVSKY'S VIOLIN CONCERTO

Michael Francis, *Conductor*
Benjamin Beilman, *Violin*

Saturday, Oct 18, 2025, Mahaffey Theater at 8 pm
Sunday, Oct 19, 2025, Ruth Eckerd Hall at 2 pm

Piotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky
(1840 - 1893)

Violin Concerto in D Major, Op. 35
I. *Allegro moderato*
II. *Canzonetta: Andante*
III. *Finale: Allegro vivacissim*

Intermission

John Adams
(b. 1947)

Harmonielehre

Part 1: [no title given]
Part 2: The Anfortas Wound
Part 3: Meister Eckhardt and Quackie

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Peter Ilyich Tchaikovsky (1840-1893)
Violin Concerto in D Major, Op. 35
Duration: ca. 34 minutes

What to listen for:

- *For contrast in the song-like second movement, Tchaikovsky gives the string players the option of muting at the bridge of their instruments, creating a softeness against the soloist's vibrant tone colors.*

As popular as it is today, Tchaikovsky's *Violin Concerto* entered the world on a sour note. After the premiere in Vienna in 1881 – with soloist Adolph Brodsky – the critic Eduard Hanslick published a scathing review: "The violin is no longer played. It is beaten black and blue." He called it music that "stinks to the ear."

Hanslick's pan may well have been tainted by Brodsky's poor playing, because the concerto soon claimed its place among the great statements in musical literature and stands alongside the violin concertos of Beethoven, Mendelssohn, Brahms, Bruch and Sibelius. Audiences relate to its rhythmic excitement, sentiment and unbridled melody.

The concerto is by no means original. It borrows from European models, most notably Mendelssohn, but with a high-intensity Russian nationalism thrown in for good measure. Like the composer's melodramatic *First Piano Concerto*, it wastes no time establishing an extroverted voice.

The first movement rides on a noble main theme, and the ensuing cadenza commands focus and technical security from the soloist. Finger-breaking double stops, piercing harmonics, compressed vibrato and extended dynamic range all seem impossible coming from a little wooden instrument.

The middle movement, a *canzonetta* ("little song"), unfolds like an aria from an opera and requires a Mozart-like grace from both violinist and orchestra. The marking for the finale – *allegro vivacissimo* – is true to the letter, and the movement opens with an explosive forte. After developing the dance of a Slavic folk song, the violin scampers ahead of the orchestra as everyone meets head-on in a frenetic climax.

John Adams (1947-)
Harmonielehre
Duration: ca. 40 minutes

What to listen for:

- *As in so much Minimalism, insistent ostinato rhythms drive the pace of Harmonielehre, reaching a near breaking point of excitement in the final movement.*

Harmonielehre opens like a jack hammer: a series of 40 powerful chords, all in E minor, pushing the music forward before disintegrating into particles that dance and swirl within the orchestra. What inspired this formidable opening? It came to Adams in a nocturnal moment: the image of a huge ship rising off the surface of the ocean, suspended in mid-air.

"The pounding chords at the beginning and end of the movement are the musical counterparts of a dream image I had shortly before starting the piece," Adams notes on his website. "In the dream, I watched a gigantic supertanker take off from the surface of San Francisco Bay and thrust itself into the sky like a Saturn rocket."

First performed in 1985, *Harmonielehre* translates to "the book of harmony" or "treatise on harmony," taken from the 1911 study by the maverick composer Arnold Schoenberg – the father of atonal music. But Adams wasn't paying tribute to Schoenberg so much as reacting to him.

"Schoenberg represented to me something twisted and contorted," said Adams, who in 2002 won the Pulitzer Prize for *On the Transmigration of Souls*. "Despite my respect for and even intimidation by the persona of Schoenberg, I felt it only honest to acknowledge that I disliked the sound of twelve-tone music. … It was with Schoenberg that the 'agony of modern music' had been born, and it was no secret that the audience for classical music during the 20th century was rapidly shrinking."

The 40-minute work unfolds over three movements, like a traditional symphony, but blends facets of Minimalism with late Romanticism. Throughout, listeners can hear the influences of Mahler, Sibelius, Debussy – and of course, Schoenberg.

After the frontal assault of Part 1 comes a slow and moody *Anfortas Wound*, where a lone trumpet floats above the orchestral sheen and the musicians wink at Mahler's unfinished *Tenth Symphony*. The finale, *Meister Eckhardt and Quackie,* is based on another dream in which Adams' daughter, dubbed Quackie, rides on the shoulders of a Medieval mystic among the heavenly bodies in a cathedral. The movement is, essentially, an extended crescendo that intensifies and leads to a brassy climax.

"This is one of the great American masterpieces of the 20th century, and it's pure Americana," said Music Director Michael Francis. "It's also very challenging to perform and has the most incredible, overpowering ending."

Historical note: In a bit of musical déjà vu, The Florida Orchestra last played this work in 2002 in a program that also included the Tchaikovsky *Violin Concerto.*

Kurt Loft is a journalist and music critic who has covered classical music for various publications and arts groups for more than 40 years. A member of the Music Critics Association of North America, he lives in St. Petersburg.