Minnesota Orchestra

Osmo Vänskä, conductor
Anthony Ross, cello

Saturday, January 6, 2018, 8 pm Orchestra Hall
Friday, January 12, 2018, 8 pm Orchestra Hall

With these concerts we gratefully recognize Kathy and Allen Lenzmeier for their generous contribution to the Minnesota Orchestra’s Investing in Inspiration campaign.

All works by Peter Ilyich Tchaikovsky

Symphony No. 2 in C minor, Opus 17, Little Russian
  Andante sostenuto – Allegro vivo
  Andantino marziale, quasi moderato
  Scherzo: Allegro molto vivace
  Finale: Moderato assai – Allegro vivo

Variations on a Rococo Theme, for Cello and Orchestra, Opus 33
  Anthony Ross, cello

INTERMISSION

ca. 20’

Symphony No. 5 in E minor, Opus 64
  Andante – Allegro con anima
  Andante cantabile con alcuna licenza
  Valse: Allegro moderato
  Finale: Andante maestoso – Allegro vivace – Moderato assai e molto maestoso

ca. 47’

OH+ Concert Preview with Akiko Fujimoto and Anthony Ross
Friday, January 12, 7:15 pm, Target Atrium

Minnesota Orchestra concerts are broadcast live on Friday evenings on stations of Classical Minnesota Public Radio, including KSJN 99.5 FM in the Twin Cities.
Tchaikovsky: Symphony No. 2; Variations on a Rococo Theme; Symphony No. 5

A single horn sings the opening solo of Tchaikovsky’s Second Symphony, which—in typical Tchaikovsky fashion—quotes a variety of Eastern European folk tunes. Traditional melodies from Ukraine, or “Little Russia,” as it was then called, inspired both the musical ideas and the nickname for this work.

From an original theme in the cello, through seven variations and a lively coda, Variations on a Rococo Theme is light, elegant and full of charm. When Franz Liszt first heard it performed, he simply exclaimed, “This is indeed music!”

Tchaikovsky’s popular Fifth Symphony—whose primary theme, he wrote, represents “complete resignation before fate”—is filled with wonderful mottos, orchestral color, balletic beauty and high drama. Watch for the finale’s false conclusion, a great climax that tricks many listeners into thinking the performance is complete.
Tchaikovsky Marathon: Influences

We think of Tchaikovsky as so original, so unique, that it comes as a surprise to recognize that there were strong influences on his music. The first of these was Russian folk music. Like many other Russian composers of his generation, Tchaikovsky felt the charm of the music he heard sung around him on the streets and in the fields. His Second Symphony—which opens this program—incorporates a number of ancient folksongs from the Ukraine. Another (and quite unexpected) influence on Tchaikovsky was the music of Mozart. Those two may seem very different people and composers, but Tchaikovsky admired the clarity and emotional balance of Mozart’s music; the Rococo Variations represent his effort to write this kind of music. The Fifth Symphony, however, finds Tchaikovsky speaking in a voice that is very much his own.

Peter Ilyich Tchaikovsky
Born: May 7, 1840, Votkinsk, Russia
Died: November 6, 1893, St. Petersburg, Russia

Symphony No. 2 in C minor,
Opus 17, Little Russian
Premiered: February 7, 1873

relations between Tchaikovsky and “The Five,” that influential band of Russian nationalist composers, were always a little tender. Those five—Mussorgsky, Borodin, Cui, Balakirev and Rimsky-Korsakov—admired Tchaikovsky’s talents but were suspicious of his conservatory training and his use of Western forms. Tchaikovsky’s Second Symphony, in fact, occasioned one of their few moments of cordial contact.

Tchaikovsky composed this symphony between June and November 1872, and it was first performed in Moscow on February 7, 1873. The symphony seemed to have a popular success, but César Cui, a member of The Five, savaged it in a review. Always vulnerable to criticism, Tchaikovsky was stung by this review, and seven years later he came back to the symphony and revised it. He was now a better composer, and he knew it. To his patron Madame von Meck he wrote: “Today I set out to remodel my Second Symphony. It went so well that before lunch I had made a rough draft of nearly half of the first movement... How much seven years can mean when a man is striving for progress in his work!”

a symphony infused with folk songs

The Second is Tchaikovsky’s shortest symphony, but what makes this music distinctive is his use of folk tunes for some of its themes. This was a technique favored by The Five, and Rimsky-Korsakov in particular was impressed when Tchaikovsky played this music for him on the piano. The authentic folk tunes that Tchaikovsky employed here come from the Ukraine, a region sometimes known as “Little Russia.” The nickname Little Russian, however, did not originate with the composer. It was coined by the music critic Nicholas Kashkin, and in Russia that nickname would have been understood to mean simply “Ukrainian.”

andante sostenuto–allegro vivo. The first movement opens with a long solo for French horn based on the Ukrainian folksong “Down by Mother Volga.” The music leaps ahead at the Allegro vivo, which itself sounds folksong-derived. Tchaikovsky may have had difficulty with symphonic form, but this movement is beautifully-made: the development treats both the main theme of the exposition and the horn theme from the introduction.

andantino marziale, quasi moderato. The second movement was originally the wedding march from Tchaikovsky’s ill-fated opera Undine. Over the timpani’s steady tread, woodwinds sing the little march tune; a more lyric second idea follows.

scherzo: allegro molto vivace. The third movement is a propulsive scherzo in ABA form. Metric units are quite short here: the outer sections are in 3/8, the trio in 2/8.

finale: moderato assai. Tchaikovsky’s brassy opening theme of the finale bears a striking resemblance to the “Promenade” theme of Mussorgsky’s Pictures at an Exhibition, though the Tchaikovsky was written first—but it is in fact a derivation of the Ukrainian folk tune “The Crane.” This theme accelerates until it suddenly is transformed into the athletic main idea, and Tchaikovsky offers a lilting second idea in the violins. It is no surprise that this finale—with its imaginative ideas about structure, unusual harmonic progressions, and use of folk tunes—should have delighted Rimsky-Korsakov. This movement was, in fact, Tchaikovsky’s own favorite.

Instrumentation: 2 flutes, piccolo, 2 oboes, 2 clarinets, 2 bassoons, 4 horns, 2 trumpets, 3 trombones, tuba, timpani, bass drum, cymbals, tamtam and strings

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Variations on a Rococo Theme, for Cello and Orchestra, Opus 33
Premiered: November 30, 1877

If we automatically identify Tchaikovsky with colorful and emotional music, we need to remember that he was also drawn to the formal clarity of eighteenth-century music and loved Mozart above all other composers. One of the finest examples of this attraction is his Variations on a Rococo Theme, composed in December 1876. The immediate impulse to write it came in a commission from the cellist Wilhelm Fitzenhagen, one of Tchaikovsky's good friends. When Fitzenhagen asked Tchaikovsky to write a piece for cello and orchestra for him, the composer responded with a set of variations based on what he called a “rococo” theme and scored for what was essentially Mozart's orchestra (pairs of woodwinds and horns, plus strings).

the music: lyric, athletic and ingenious
A brief orchestral introduction (how light and clear this music sounds!) gives way to the entrance of the solo cello, which sings the “rococo” theme. That theme, Tchaikovsky's own, is marked espressivo on its first appearance and falls into two eight-bar phrases. Seven variations follow. These are nicely contrasted: some are lyric, some athletic. Some emphasize the cello, while others vigorously toss the theme between soloist and orchestra. Tchaikovsky varies key and meter throughout the set, and he ingeniously turns the final variation into an exciting coda.

Instrumentation: solo cello with orchestra comprising 2 flutes, 2 oboes, 2 clarinets, 2 bassoons, 2 horns and strings

Symphony No. 5 in E minor, Opus 64
Premiered: November 17, 1888

In the winter of 1887-88, Tchaikovsky made a tour of Western Europe, conducting his own works in Leipzig, Hamburg (where he met Brahms), Berlin, Prague, Paris and London. Those audiences responded enthusiastically to his music (Brahms was an exception), and Tchaikovsky returned to Russia ready to attempt a new symphony. In April 1888, he moved into a villa in Frolovskoye, northwest of Moscow, where he could work on his new symphony and take long walks in the woods. His Fifth Symphony was done by August, and Tchaikovsky led the premiere in St. Petersburg on November 17, 1888.

“resignation before fate”
The Fifth Symphony—full of those wonderful Tchaikovsky themes, imaginative orchestral color, and excitement—has become one of his most popular works. As he did in the Fourth, Tchaikovsky builds this symphony around a motto-theme, and in his notebooks he suggested that the motto of the Fifth Symphony represents “complete resignation before fate.” But that is as far as the resemblance goes, for Tchaikovsky supplied no program for the Fifth Symphony, nor does this music seem to be “about” anything. The motto theme returns in each of the four movements, but it may be best to understand this motto as a unifying device rather than as anything so dramatic as the Fourth Symphony’s “sword of Damocles.”

the music: a wealth of melodies, excitement—and a false ending

Andante–Allegro con anima. Clarinets introduce the somber motto-theme at the beginning of the slow introduction, and gradually this leads to the main body of the movement, marked Allegro con anima. Over the orchestra's steady tread, solo clarinet and bassoon sing the movement's surging main theme, and there follows a wealth of thematic material. This lengthy movement is built on three separate-theme groups, full of those soaring and sumptuous Tchaikovsky melodies.

Andante cantabile con alcuna licenza. Deep string chords at the opening of the Andante cantabile introduce one of the great solos for French horn, and a few moments later the oboe has the graceful second subject. For a movement that begins in such relaxed spirits, this music is twice shattered by the return of the motto-theme, which blazes out dramatically in the trumpets.

Valse: Allegro moderato. Tchaikovsky springs a surprise in the third movement—instead of the expected scherzo, he writes a lovely waltz. He rounds the movement off beautifully with an extended coda based on the waltz tune, and in its closing moments the motto-theme makes a fleeting appearance, like a figure seen through the mists.

Finale: Andante maestoso–Allegro vivace–Moderato assai e molto maestoso. However misty that theme may have seemed at the end of the third movement, it comes into crystalline focus at the beginning of the finale. Tchaikovsky moves to E major here and sounds out the motto to open this movement. The main body of the finale, marked Allegro vivace, leaps to life, and the motto-theme breaks in more and more often as it proceeds. The movement drives to a great climax, then breaks off in silence. This is a trap, and it often tricks the unwary into premature applause, for the symphony is not yet over. Out of the ensuing silence begins the real coda, and the motto-theme now leads the way on constantly-accelerating tempos to the (true) conclusion in E major.

Instrumentation: 3 flutes (1 doubling piccolo), 2 oboes, 2 clarinets, 2 bassoons, 4 horns, 2 trumpets, 3 trombones, tuba, timpani and strings

Program notes by Eric Bromberger.