

PYOTR IL'YCH TCHAIKOVSKY (1840-1893)

Vassily Primakov, piano

The Seasons, Op. 37-bis (42:47)

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|-----------|------|---------------------------|---------------|
| I | I | January (By the Hearth) | (4:45) |
| 2 | II | February (Shrovetide) | (2:54) |
| 3 | III | March (Lark's Song) | (2:42) |
| 4 | IV | April (Snowdrop) | (2:32) |
| 5 | V | May (White Nights) | (4:18) |
| 6 | VI | June (Barcarole) | (4:41) |
| 7 | VII | July (Reaper's Song) | (1:46) |
| 8 | VIII | August (Harvest) | (3:25) |
| 9 | IX | September (Hunt) | (2:44) |
| 10 | X | October (Autumn Song) | (4:48) |
| 11 | XI | November (In the Troika) | (3:13) |
| 12 | XII | December (Christmas-Tide) | (3:53) |

Grand Sonata in G major, Op. 37 (32:22)

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|-----------|-----|------------------------------------|----------------|
| 13 | I | Moderato e risoluto | (12:52) |
| 14 | II | Andante non troppo, quasi moderato | (10:06) |
| 15 | III | Scherzo: Allegro giocoso | (2:58) |
| 16 | IV | Finale: Allegro vivace | (6:11) |

Tchaikovsky: Grand Sonata in G major, Op. 37

The Seasons, Op. 37~bis

Although he composed brilliantly effective works for piano and orchestra – notably the Piano Concerto No. 1 in B flat minor, one of the most celebrated works in the entire 19th-century repertoire – Tchaikovsky's works for piano solo have attracted perhaps less attention than almost any other sector of his output, and this even though he used the piano continually and wrote for it frequently. In fact, many of his solo compositions are confined to the salon; there are only a few substantial creations, such as the sonatas and *The Seasons*, itself a cycle of miniatures. But though some of his short pieces are routine, even in a few cases trivial, he was a composer who thoroughly understood the instrument and entrusted to it some of his most highly impressive and charming ideas.

Tchaikovsky wrote altogether three piano sonatas, but only the last of these was published in his lifetime. In 1863-64 the young composer, while still a student at the Conservatoire, had essayed a single-movement sonata in F minor, but this remained an unfinished torso, although he used some of its materials in other works. (There is a completion by the pianist Leslie Howard.) Then in the following year he composed a full-scale four-movement sonata in C sharp minor, but did not consider it wise to release it for publication: it was eventually printed shortly after his death,

with the misleadingly late-sounding opus number 80. Tchaikovsky put it aside, but drew upon its scherzo for the substance of the corresponding movement in his First Symphony, *Winter Daydreams*. Finally in the Spring of 1878 Tchaikovsky wrote the **Piano Sonata in G major, Op. 37** which was printed, and established itself, under the title 'Grand Sonata' (*Bol'shaya Sonata*), an appellation that indicates the importance that the composer attached to it.

This is indeed his most important utterance for solo piano, a work of almost symphonic scope, although he came for a while to think of it as 'dry and complicated', not so much the product of inspiration as of technique. In fact it is a work which has tended to divide critics into two camps, one enthusiastic, the other doubtful. What is beyond question is that in the hands of the right pianist the G major Sonata sounds superb, whereas it is not one of those works that will 'play itself' even if saddled with an inferior performer. Moreover, it is in one sense an expressive sequel to Tchaikovsky's Fourth Symphony, which he had completed not long before, and the 'orchestral' effect of much of the piano writing is undeniable.

Tchaikovsky began work on the sonata at the beginning of March 1878 at Clarens in Switzerland, during his prolonged sojourn in southern Europe following the break-up of his disastrous marriage to Antonina Milyukova, and his letters show that after initial enthusiasm he began to find it difficult

to progress with the piece. He laid it aside for a while to concentrate on writing his Violin Concerto, but when he returned to Russia in mid-April, to his family's summer estate at Kamenka in the Ukraine, he took it up again and, in a furiously productive creative period that produced several other compositions, had the whole work drafted by the end of April. Revision and fair-copying followed, and the final manuscript is dated 26 July (Old Style) 1878. Nevertheless it was over a year before the Sonata was heard in public, when Nikolai Rubinstein gave the first performance at a concert of the Russian Musical Society. Tchaikovsky did not attend this premiere, but a week later Rubinstein played the Sonata for the composer at his house. Writing to his patron Nadezhda von Meck, Tchaikovsky commented that it was an excellent rendering: "I was simply astounded by his artistry and amazed by his energy, in playing this somewhat dry and complicated piece." Despite Rubinstein's advocacy, when the score was published Tchaikovsky dedicated his work to another noted pianist, Karl Klindworth, who at that time was Professor of Piano at Moscow Conservatory.

Tchaikovsky's Piano Sonata is large and sonorous in gesture and ambitious in its extent. The first movement, marked *Moderato e risoluto*, opens energetically, with a brisk march-theme that dominates the structure. The melody is rather reminiscent of Schumann, who seems a pervasive background influence throughout the sonata, as is its presentation in massive block chords. In contrast comes a more recitative-like section, and

the lyrical secondary material, which makes use of a prominent dotted rhythm. It is beautiful, in fact vintage Tchaikovsky. The exposition concludes with a codetta which not only brings back the opening march-theme but alludes to the *Dies Irae* plainchant, a melody more often associated with Rachmaninov. And while Rachmaninov's use of that baleful theme is almost always gloomy, Tchaikovsky uses it here to generate quite a cheerful melody. The ensuing development section is turbulent and dramatic, and Tchaikovsky drives this extrovert movement to its grandiloquent conclusion on the march-theme.

The *Andante non troppo* second movement, in the relative minor (E minor) completely changes the mood. It is subdued and melancholy, based upon a dark-hued opening melody that is essentially spun out of a single interval, the sighing, falling semitone. (Here the model, if there is one, seems more likely to be Chopin than Schumann.) Cast in a modified rondo form, the varied episodes give the movement something of the character of an operatic scena. A march-like episode in dotted rhythm leads to a varied reprise of the opening melody, and the movement's central portion, marked *Moderato con animazione*, is a lyrical outpouring in Tchaikovsky's finest romantic vein. The main theme, and the march-interlude, are recalled before a grand climax makes way for a magically delicate coda, presenting the central *Moderato* theme again with a syncopated accompaniment.

That syncopated rhythm anticipates the *Allegro giocoso* scherzo, a brief but scintillating piece of whirlwind virtuosity which treats the beats of the bar with a notable freedom that sets its phrases tumbling across the keyboard, and even underpins and enlivens the lyrical trio section. The finale, marked *Allegro vivace*, is another sonata-form design. Its insistent and martial opening subject sets up a continual *moto perpetuo*-like impetus, against which the composer plays off a playful *scherzando* second theme and a long-breathed, passionate central melody. Tchaikovsky seems intent on wringing every bit of energy he can from this material, and the movement builds to a dramatic and rhetorical climax, with a truly orchestral sense of sonority, only to conclude in a surprisingly restrained, valedictory coda, built upon the main theme.

The opus number, 37, that Tchaikovsky gave to his sonata was one that he extended to cover a very different piano composition which he had written two years previously: *The Seasons, Op. 37~bis*. In December 1875 Nikolai Bernard, editor of the St. Petersburg monthly journal *Nuvellist*, had commissioned Tchaikovsky to compose a short piano piece as a supplement for each monthly issue for a full year, from January to December 1876, portraying subjects and activities typical of each month. There is an oft-repeated story that Tchaikovsky was so uninterested in fulfilling this monthly chore (and he described it in a letter to a friend as 'baking musical pancakes') that he instructed his servant, Andrei, to remind him the day

before each piece was due, so that he could simply dash it off in time for the printer. In fact, the evidence of the composer's correspondence with Bernard suggests that in fact the whole cycle was in existence by May 1876, perhaps so that Tchaikovsky, who was short of funds, could lay claim to his whole fee. (It was not until 1877 that he began to receive his annual stipend from Nadezhda von Meck.) And whatever Tchaikovsky's attitude to his commission, the overall result is perhaps the most satisfying of all his solo piano works.

Though given the overall title *The Seasons*, the twelve pieces could be more accurately called 'The Months'. Each one was printed with a descriptive or evocative epigraph from Russian poetry, mainly from the works of major poets such as Pushkin, A. N. Tolstoy, Nikolai Nekrasov or Anafasy Fet. Some of them have taken their place among Tchaikovsky's most charming and best-loved keyboard miniatures. Intended to be within the capabilities of amateur pianists, they do offer occasional challenges and have sufficient subtleties to interest real virtuosi, too. As character pieces, they create the musical atmosphere alluded to by their respective titles with unerring skill. They are almost all in a straightforward ternary form, but this formal simplicity, coupled with the programmatic imagery, was almost a spur to Tchaikovsky's invention in terms of tunes and textures. Many of the numbers remind us of Tchaikovsky's genius as a ballet composer, and it is easy enough to imagine a ballet constructed around their sequence of varied

moods and characters. Equally it is possible to hear, almost continuously, orchestral timbres in the music, and a number of later composers have made arrangements, either of individual movements or the entire cycle, for orchestra: there are for example full-orchestral versions by the conductor Alexander Gauk and the British composer David Matthews; there is also one for solo violin and orchestra by Peter Breiner. In 2001 the composer Alexander Raskatov produced a shortened and 'updated' pot-pourri version, *The Seasons Digest*, for violin, chamber orchestra and tape. But Tchaikovsky's solo piano original remains, on its own terms, a modest but inimitable achievement.

January: By the Fireside is a gentle, rather melancholic reverie ('The flame is dying in the fireplace, the candle has burnt', says the accompanying verse from Pushkin). It is rendered more interesting than most salon music by its intriguing chromatic side-slips; the rippling textures of the central section engender a more hopeful mood. *February: Carnival* is a busy, rumbustious toccata-like effusion evoking the celebrations that precede the self-denial of Lent. The eponymous bird in *March: The Song of the Lark* is sensitively depicted in the interlinking curlicues of Tchaikovsky's decorated melody. The delicate *April: Snowdrops* is the first waltz in the cycle, a hesitant and tremulous but undeniably charming one. In the accompanying verse, Maikov calls the snowdrop 'a last reminder of foregone suffering. And a fresh hope of happiness to come': Tchaikovsky mirrors that mood.

May: White Nights (St. Petersburg nights in the mid-year are called 'White' because the darkness only lasts for a couple of hours even though ice and snow may still be present) is a Romantic nocturne which develops a fugitive dance for its central section and attains a brief passionate climax.

'Stars with secret sadness will shine overhead,' says Plyeshev's verse that goes with *June: Barcarolle*, and this movement's haunting, melancholic G minor tune of is perhaps the best-known melody of the entire sequence, and has been the subject of countless arrangements for other media. Among all Tchaikovsky's short piano works this piece is like a perfect jewel. *July: The Song of the Reaper* seems to imitate the repetitive motion of scything, but it develops a fine momentum and joyful, bell-like chordal writing. That mood carries through into *August: Harvest Time*, a busy and animated piece, with a song-like central section. *September: The Hunt* is more frankly pictorial, with its mimicking of hunting-horns and march-like middle span.

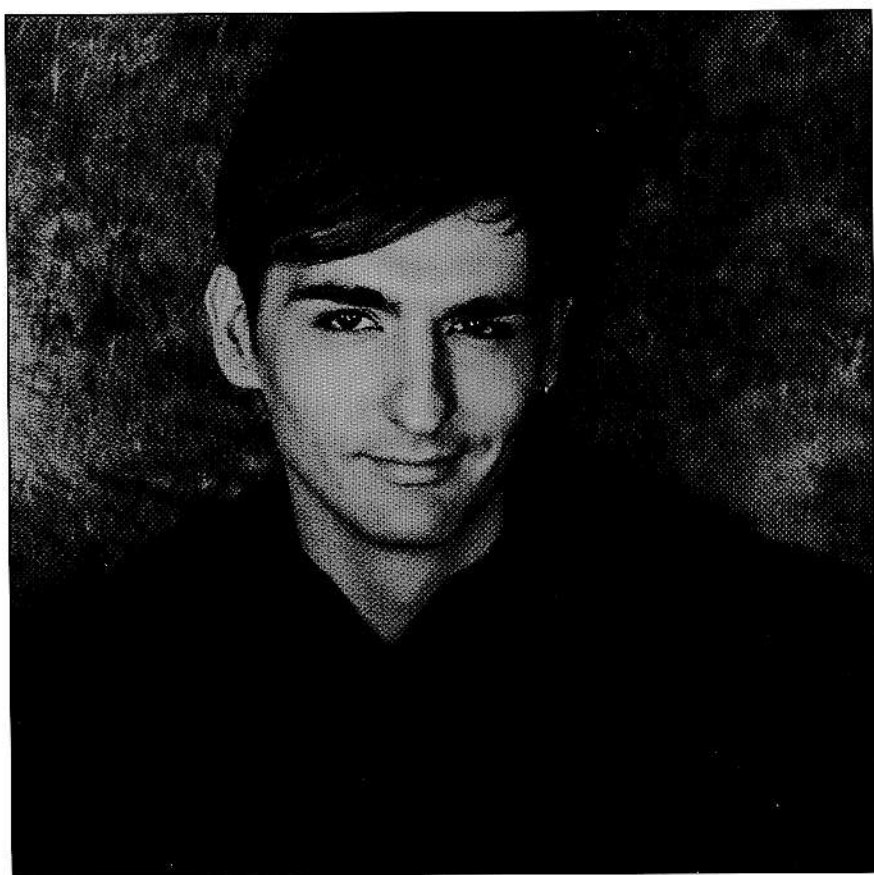
October: Autumn Song is another expressive high-point of the cycle, an elegiac meditation with its sad, slow melody and sense of all-encompassing regret. At the reprise of the main tune Tchaikovsky adds a tenor melody to create the effect of a duet. *November: The Troika* is the other famous number of the cycle – it was a great favourite of Rachmaninov, who often performed it as an encore. The piece is a classic Russian sleigh-ride, starting slow but working up to an ebullient ride with obvious sleigh-bell effects.

The cycle ends, naturally enough, with *December: Christmas*, the other waltz of the cycle. Here the composer of *Swan Lake* and *The Nutcracker* creates a flamboyant example of this dance he handled so well to bring the Russian year to a joyous conclusion.

Notes by Malcolm MacDonald



The young Moscow-born pianist **Vassily Primakov** has enriched the current concert scene with blazing and deeply personal playing. At his concerto debut with the Westchester Philharmonic in Alice Tully Hall, Jeremy Eichler of the *New York Times* reported that Primakov "gave a fiery performance of Rachmaninoff's Second Piano Concerto, with bold, expressive phrasing and dramatic commitment that brought the audience to its feet." Indeed, cheering audiences have become a hallmark of Primakov's platform appearances. As a prizewinner of the Cleveland International Piano Competition, Primakov was cited by Donald Rosenberg of the *Cleveland Plain Dealer* for his idiomatic mastery of the Chopin style: "Primakov once again played Chopin's Sonata No. 3, showing why the jury awarded him the Chopin Prize. How many pianists can make a line sing as the 19-year-old Moscow



native did on this occasion? The slow movement overflowed with dreamy lyricism shaped with a patient and colorful hand. Every poignant phrase took ethereal wing. Elsewhere the music soared with all of the turbulence and poetic vibrancy it possesses. We will be hearing much from this remarkable musician.”

Vassily Primakov was born in Moscow in 1979. He entered Moscow’s legendary Central Special Music School at the age of eleven as a pupil of the brilliantly unorthodox pedagogue Vera Gornostaeva. At seventeen, after a summer at the Music Academy of the West in Santa Barbara, he came to New York to pursue studies at the Juilliard School with another pedagogue who emphasizes a personal approach to the keyboard, the noted pianist Jerome Lowenthal, himself a student of Alfred Cortot and Willam Kapell. At Juilliard Mr. Primakov won the prestigious William Petschek Piano Recital Award, which presented his debut recital at Alice Tully Hall. Vassily Primakov began his American career after winning First Prize in the 2002 Young Concert Artists (YCA) International Auditions. As recitalist and orchestral guest soloist, Mr. Primakov has performed throughout the U.S., and has made guest soloist appearances with the San Diego Symphony, Maryland Symphony, Utah Symphony, Westchester Philharmonic, Toledo Symphony, and Odense Symphony Orchestra (Denmark) among others.

Prior to coming to the United States, Mr. Primakov won First Prize in the Rachmaninoff International Young Pianist Competition and First Prize in the Tchaikovsky Young Artist Competition. While a student at Juilliard, aided by a Susan W. Rose Career Grant, he placed among the top two laureates of the Cleveland International Piano Competition (1999) and won both the Silver Medal and the Audience Prize in the 2002 Gina Bachauer International Artists Piano Competition. His recordings for Bridge Records include Beethoven Sonatas (BRIDGE 9251) and the Chopin Concertos (BRIDGE 9278). Upcoming recordings for Bridge include a disc of Chopin Mazurkas, and Mozart's Piano Concertos, K. 491 and K. 595.

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