

Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky
(1840-1893)

The Music for Piano and Orchestra

Jerome Lowenthal, piano
The London Symphony Orchestra
Sergiu Comissiona, conductor

Disc A (68:48)

Piano Concerto No. 1 in B-flat minor, Op. 23 (35:00)
(Original Version, 1875)

- 1 I. Allegro non troppo e molto maestoso (20:24)
- 2 II. Andantino semplice (7:13)
- 3 III. Allegro con fuoco (7:16)

Concert Fantasy in G major, Op. 56 (1884) (28:52)

- 4 I. Quasi Rondo: Andante mosso (14:15)
- 5 II. Contrasts: Andante cantabile (14:31)

- 6 (Movement I, alternate ending) (4:44)

Disc B (57:54)

Piano Concerto No. 2 in G major, Op. 44 (42:08)
(Original Version, 1880)

- 1 I. Allegro brillante e molto vivace (20:09)
- 2 II. Andante non troppo (14:21)
(Michael Davis, violin; Douglas Cummings, cello)
- 3 III. Allegro con fuoco (7:29)

4 Piano Concerto No. 3 in E-flat major, Op. 75 (15:36)
Allegro brillante

On October 29th, 1874, fatidic birth-year of Arnold Schoenberg, Charles Ives and Gertrude Stein, Tchaikovsky wrote to his brother Modest, "I would like to start a piano concerto, but somehow I have neither ideas nor inspiration." Five weeks later he writes that although he is wallowing in the piano concerto with his whole soul, it is going very badly. And yet, by January 2nd, it was finished and ready to be played for its intended dedicatee, the great Nikolay Rubinstein. Three years later, in a celebrated letter to Mme. von Meck, the composer described the disastrous session with Rubinstein. The first movement had been greeted by an ominously long silence, followed by streams of lava-like invective: the work was unworthy, unimpressive and unplayable. Perhaps, Rubinstein conceded patronizingly, if Piotr Ilyich were to make all the corrections which he, the master pianist, demanded, the piece might be performable. Tchaikovsky's proud answer rings through music history: "I shall not change one single note!" Exit, slamming door behind him.

Fast forward to May, 1891. The composer, a still impressive but prematurely aged man, receives a tumultuous ovation in the newly opened Carnegie Hall. He is the lionized guest conductor and composer in a series of four inaugural concerts, which will be climaxed by a performance of the B-Flat minor Concerto. In the twenty-six years since he rejected Rubinstein's advice, the work has been played by many of the world's most celebrated virtuosi, including Bulow, Taneyev, Sapelnikov, Siloti, Sauer, and Nikolay

Rubinstein, himself. What a vindication for Tchaikovsky! But what a vindication also for Rubinstein. Because over the years, Tchaikovsky has made dozens of changes in his composition, and it is reasonable to assume that the changes were those which Rubinstein had suggested. Was he right to do so? Many of the changes are pianistic improvements, and these one cannot quarrel with.

The second movement, with its enchanting combination of slow movement and scherzo (using the chansonette "*Il faut s'amuser, danser et rire*") has been left intact except for a few insignificant rearrangements. In the outer movements, however, small changes in the expressive indications- a dolce at the end of a bravura passage is removed and a molto sostenuto is added- have the effect of making transitions less subtle and sectional outlines more clearcut. In addition, there are two major changes. The first comes right at the beginning of the Concerto: the arpeggiated forte chords which the composer had conceived as an accompaniment to the opening tune, to be answered in the next phrase by pizzicato chords in the strings which accompany the dance-variation of the tune in the piano- these have been replaced by the thunderously solid piano chords which have become, along with the "Tonight we Love" theme, the hallmark of the Concerto. And in the third movement, a perfectly-constructed episode has been gutted of twelve measures of orchestral counterpoint. Tchaikovsky was unhappy with the sound of piano against orchestra and conceived of the concerto form as continuity rather than ensemble. The music streams

through long solo passages followed by long orchestral tutti passages, with the continuity provided by the expansion and contraction of intervallic motives. Insecure and vulnerable to negative criticism, he made changes which all tend towards increasing brilliance at the expense of the flow of musical discourse. It goes without saying that the B-Flat Minor Concerto is a magnificent vehicle for virtuoso pianists and conductors. But it is also a work of delicately intricate craftsmanship. Listening to this wonderful music in its original version is a way of reconnecting to it.



By April, 1884, the international success of the *First Concerto* was an old story, and the *Second Concerto* had been received with respect and esteem. That was not, however, enough for the composer, who felt frustrated by the paucity of performances which his *Second Concerto* was receiving. He began toying with the idea of writing a third concerto but suffered from his usual self-doubts: "Hit upon an idea for a piano concerto," he writes in his diary, "but it turned out too weak and not new." At the same time, he was working on a projected symphony. Unhappy with his work on both pieces, he solved his problems by using the dumka-like first movement of the symphony as the second and final movement of the *Concert Fantasy* while turning the symphony into a suite. On February 22nd, 1885, the *Concert Fantasy* was performed with great success by Taneyev, who continued to play it with consistent public

success. In this work, Tchaikovsky carries even further than in the First and Second Concerti the practice of separating piano and orchestra. The first movement, like the *Second Concerto*, is in the festive key of G major. Although the movement is in something like classical sonata form, the colorful orchestration, with liberal use of bells, creates an almost folkloric atmosphere. The development of the material is given over entirely to a massive and quite magnificent cadenza in which a two-note cadential motive is expanded with Lisztian bravura and imagination. To the somewhat conventional recapitulation, Tchaikovsky added a brilliant coda, to be played if the first movement is performed alone. The appended coda can be heard on this disk.

As for the second movement, it is a masterpiece of Slavic seduction. The main theme is presented first as a piano solo, with strummed chords supporting a melancholy sub-dominant dominated melody. In the second phrase, the piano is joined by solo cello in a duet which has Tchaikovsky DNA in every note. Soon the melody is taken over by the strings, while the horn moans and throbs. Eventually, after a series of extravaganzas of orchestral color, the melancholy melody yields to a raucously riotous Russian dance. The two sections alternate until the brilliant coda, which is distilled from the opening music of the first movement. Although very popular in Russia during the composer's life, this music, perhaps because of its unconventional structure, is rarely performed today and, in particular in the United States, it awaits discovery.



The splendor of Tchaikovsky's *Second Piano Concerto* is in striking contrast with the composer's diffident letter of October 17th, 1879: "I have started writing a piano concerto in a leisurely sort of way. I only work in the mornings before lunch, but composition is something of an effort. I do not feel any great desire to write but experience on the other hand has shown that I cannot live without work." The music that emerged from this compositional lethargy, real or assumed, is vibrant with buoyant rhythms, tender lyricism and structural daring. In particular, the first two movements open new possibilities for the concerto form. Already in the *First Concerto*, Tchaikovsky, who disliked the sound of orchestra with piano, had led the musical development through long passages of orchestral tutti and pianistic cadenzas. In the *Second Concerto*, he separates the two forces even more, using dialogue often rather than ensemble. The magnificent cadenza comes before, rather than more conventionally, after the recapitulation, thereby subsuming the development. Mendelssohn had done something similar in his *Violin Concerto* in E minor, Op. 64, but the vast scale of Tchaikovsky's cadenza, following as it does a long complex orchestral tutti passage, gives the idea a new significance.

The second movement is even more unusual: piano, violin, and cello are given equally lavish solo parts in the first and third sections of this

tripartite movement, while in the middle section, the piano accompanies a brilliantly scored orchestra. And the third movement is a brilliant Russian dance-rondo. Tchaikovsky, who had originally dedicated his *First Concerto* to Nikolay Rubinstein, only to substitute the name of Hans von Bulow when Rubinstein had harshly criticized the work, now dedicated his new concerto to Rubinstein, certainly in the expectation that the great pianist, who had quite changed his mind about the *First Concerto*, would perform the Second. But in 1881 Rubinstein died, and the premiere was given in the following year by Taneyev, who had given the Moscow premiere of the *First Concerto* and would in the future similarly introduce the *Third Concerto* and the *Concert Fantasy*. The work was very well received and was performed by a number of other pianists, Sapelnikov in particular. The composer, however, somewhat spoiled by the enormous success of the *First Concerto*, was disappointed by the failure of the world's great virtuosi to add this new work to their repertoire. Was it, perhaps, that it was too long?

Everyone whom he consulted agreed that length was the problem. Fortunately, or so it seemed, Alexander Siloti, the brilliant young pianist who was later to be one of the luminaries of the Juilliard School's piano faculty, offered to make discreet cuts in the master's work. Well and good, but when the composer saw the proposed cuts, he was appalled. Finally, he agreed to some of them but resolutely refused to accept Siloti's evisceration of the second movement. A month later, he was dead, and

somehow Siloti's version got into print and stayed there. Some of Siloti's changes involved simplification of the piano writing, and some involved cutting passages which, though beautiful and necessary to the formal proportions, were repetitious. But the barbarous reworking of the second movement, with string solos given to the piano and the entire middle section eliminated, could only have resulted from Siloti's fear of formal novelty. It was Siloti's version that was choreographed memorably by Balanchine and that was recorded by such master pianists as Emil Gillels and Shura Cherkassky. Today, however, playing anything but the original version is unconscionable.



In May, 1892, less than a year and a half before his death, Tchaikovsky began work on what was intended to be his sixth symphony. But by February 11th of the following year, he could write to his beloved nephew "Bob" Davydov (who would commit suicide in 1906), "You know that I destroyed the symphony I had composed and partly orchestrated in the autumn. And a good thing too!" However, Bob persuaded him to un-destroy the work and rewrite it as a piano concerto. On the fifth of July he began work on the transformation. Having finished the first movement, he lost patience with the project, or perhaps he realized that he was composing another problematically long piano concerto. In any case, he sent the first movement to his publisher with the title *Allegro Brillante*.

Days later he drank the glass of unboiled water which probably led to his death from cholera. The publisher, freed from the composer's interference, published the work as *Concerto No. 3*, and it has remained so titled. The key of e flat major is unusual for Tchaikowsky and suggests that the Schumann *Rhenish Symphony*, or even Beethoven's *Eroica*, was in the back of his mind. There is a diatonic nobility in the opening theme, and the conception is much more orchestral than that of the other piano concerti. The beautiful second theme, like those of the *First Piano Concerto*, the *Piano Trio*, and the *Grande Sonate* in G Major, begins on a Tchaikovsky signature harmony: the third inversion of a seventh chord, while the closing theme is a delightful Russian dance. But it is the cadenza, which the composer added to the music of his defunct symphony, which sings with greatest originality. Long, complex and immensely virtuosic, like the cadenza of the *Second Concerto* it takes over most of the development and sends the work spiraling into new musical worlds. Taneyev, who had already performed the Moscow premiere of the *First Concerto* and the world premieres of the *Second Concerto* and the *Concert Fantasy*, played this premiere, too, but fifteen months after the composer's death. He also completed Tchaikovsky's sketches for turning the rest of his incomplete symphony into a piano concerto, and performed these two movements in February 1896 under the title *Andante and Finale*. The *Third Concerto* is performed occasionally, but its beauties remain to be discovered by the larger music world.

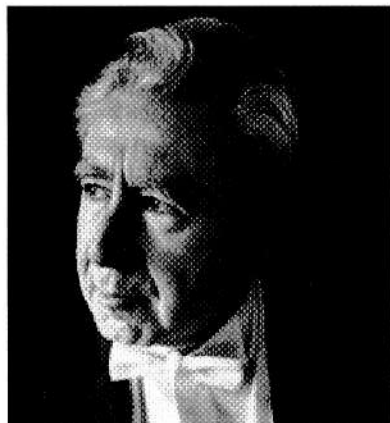
Notes by Jerome Lowenthal



Jerome Lowenthal, born in 1932, continues to fascinate audiences, who find in his playing a youthful intensity and an eloquence born of life-experience. He is a virtuoso of the fingers and the emotions. Mr. Lowenthal studied in his native Philadelphia with Olga Samaroff-Stokowski, in New York with William Kapell and Edward Steuermann, and in Paris with

Alfred Cortot, meanwhile traveling annually to Los Angeles for coachings with Artur Schnabel. After winning prizes in three international competitions (Bolzano, Darmstadt, and Brussels), he moved to Jerusalem where, for three years, he played, taught and lectured. Returning to America, he made his debut with the New York Philharmonic playing Bartok's *Concerto no. 2* in 1963. Since then, he has performed more-or-less everywhere, from the Aleutians to Zagreb. Conductors with whom he has appeared as soloist include Barenboim, Ozawa, Tilson Thomas, Temirkanov, and Slatkin, as well as such giants of the past as Leonard Bernstein, Eugene Ormandy, Pierre Monteux and Leopold Stokowski. He has played sonatas with Itzhak Perlman, piano duos with Ronit Amir (his late wife), Carmel

Lowenthal (his daughter), and Ursula Oppens, as well as quintets with the Lark, Avalon and Shanghai Quartets. He has recently recorded the Beethoven Fourth Concerto with cadenzas by eleven different composers. His other recordings include concerti by Liszt, solo works by Sinding and Bartok, and chamber-music by Arensky and Taneyev. Teaching, too, is an important part of Mr. Lowenthal's musical life. For eighteen years at the Juilliard School and for thirty-nine summers at the Music Academy of the West, he has worked with an extraordinary number of gifted pianists, whom he encourages to understand the music they play in a wide aesthetic and cultural perspective and to project it with the freedom which that perspective allows.



Sergiu Comissiona was born in Bucharest, Romania in 1928. His first professional engagement was as a violinist in the Bucharest Radio Quartet in 1947 and also as a violinist in the Rumanian State Ensemble in 1947. He studied conducting at the Bucharest Conservatory, and then privately with Silvestri and Lindenberg, making his conducting debut at the age of 17,

leading a performance of Gounod's opera *Faust* in the Rumanian town of Silbiu. In his twenties he was named principal conductor of the Romanian National Opera, which he led from 1955 to 1959. In 1956, he won the prestigious Besançon Conducting Competition. His Jewish heritage drew him to emigrate to Israel in 1959, where he was appointed musical director of the Haifa Symphony Orchestra the same year. In 1960 he founded and was appointed musical director of the Ramat Gan Chamber Orchestra. He made his American debut with the Philadelphia Orchestra in 1965. In 1967 he gave up his chamber orchestra position in Israel to become principal conductor of the Northern Ireland Orchestra in Belfast (1967 -- 1968). He was appointed music director of the Baltimore Symphony Orchestra (1969-1984), and moved his home to that city. He was also Principal

Conductor of the Gothenburg Symphony Orchestra (Sweden) (1966 -1973), and in 1982 became Chief Conductor of the Netherlands Radio Philharmonic in Hilversum, Netherlands. He was Chief Conductor of the Helsinki Philharmonic (1990-1994), and the American Symphony Orchestra (1977-1982). Comissiona also held music directorships with the Houston Symphony (1979-1988), the Vancouver Symphony Orchestra (1991-2000) and was Music Director of the New York City Opera (1987-88). Comissiona was principal conductor of the RTVE Symphony Orchestra (Madrid), from 1990 to 1998. He premiered and gave the first recordings of a number of modern works including symphonies by Allan Pettersson, who dedicated his ninth symphony to him. Sergiu Comissiona died in March of 2005.

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