

One of the greatest cellists of the twentieth century, a performer who combined technical brilliance with soulful expressiveness, Danil Shafran was born in 1923, in Leningrad (now St. Petersburg). Shafran's first teacher was his father, who was the principal cellist of the Leningrad Philharmonic Orchestra. At the age of eight, Shafran started studying with Alexander Shtrimer, at the Special Music School for Children. Two years later, he was among a group of students selected to advance directly to the Leningrad Conservatory. When he was eleven, Shafran made his debut with the Leningrad Philharmonic, continuing his studies with Shtrimer, who taught the young cellist to appreciate music in the wider context of humanistic culture and of art in general. In 1937, Shafran won the All-Union competition for cellists and violinists. The prize was a magnificent 1630 Amati cello, which Shafran played until the end of his life. This instrument had a delicate, but gorgeous, tone, and Shafran was sometimes criticized for playing an instrument that was perceived as more appropriate for chamber music. In 1950, the year he graduated from the Leningrad Conservatory, Shafran won the Prague International Cello Competition. Although Shafran toured Europe, the U.S., and Japan, he shunned the glamour of international fame, preferring to perform and record in the U.S.S.R. His recordings, for the Melodiya label, include much of the standard cello repertoire, with particular emphasis on Romantic and -century Russian music. For example, he recorded Kabalevsky's Cello Concerto No. 1 in 1954, creating, two years later, a legendary recording of the Cello Sonata by Shostakovich, with the composer at the piano. One of the high points of Shafran's career was his 1967 performance of Kabalevsky's Cello Concerto No. 2, one of the most demanding works of the cello repertoire. Written as a musical monument to the victims of World War II, and dedicated to Shafran, Kabalevsky's extraordinarily difficult work provided the cellist with an opportunity to display his prodigious technique and profound musicality. Throughout his career, Shafran sought to enrich the cello repertoire by playing transcriptions of works for other instruments. Many of these transcriptions, which include the Franck Violin Sonata and the Shostakovich Viola Sonata, are miniatures by composers such as Schumann, Chopin, and Brahms, which he often offered as recital encores. Shafran's performances of these familiar encore miniatures, such as Schumann's "Träumerei," from the Kinderszenen for piano, were truly magical, for his playing could transform a familiar piano piece into cello music of unearthly beauty. Shafran was particularly known for his rich, expressive tone; his vibrato was unique, and when he played without vibrato, Shafran used his prodigious bowing technique to enrich his tone. A hallmark of Shafran's highly personal style, in addition to his finely nuanced and profoundly expressive tone, was his inimitable rubato. All in all, Shafran was a stupendous virtuoso whose breath-taking technical skill was totally subservient to a profound, overwhelmingly powerful musicality. Always in total control of the formal aspects of the music he played, Shafran constantly sought, as he revisited a particular piece, to probe deeper into its inner being, methodically striving to reveal the sometimes incomprehensible complexity of the music that he played. He died in 1998.

Daniel

SHAFRAN

Kabalevsky Cello Concerto

Tchaikovsky Variations on the Rococo Theme

Dmitri Kabalevsky wrote his Cello Concerto No. 1 in 1948 and 1949. It is the middle piece in a trilogy of concertos that he wrote for young Russian musicians, to whom he dedicated a large part of his life's energy and compositions. The Op. 48 is a violin concerto and the Op. 50 is a piano concerto. The Cello Concerto No. 1 was premiered in 1949, by Svyatoslav Knushevitsky, a young student to whom the piece was also dedicated. The orchestra was a student group from the Moscow Conservatory. The piece was received with much acclaim, as were the other two concertos in the trilogy. Kabalevsky was very popular with Russian audiences, composing music that was pleasing to the ear, and did not stray far from convention. Kabalevsky did, however, draw criticism from some because he generally rejected the direction new music was taking.

This concerto is in G minor and has three movements. The first is a march-type Allegro that begins with pizzicato in the string sections. They provide a steady pulse over which the cello enters, arco, with a striking melody that contains at once an energetic, melodic tension and a lyrical melodic release as the line soars into the upper register. The contrasting theme in this movement sounds less like a march and has almost a singsong quality about it. There is a brief cadenza toward the end, and the cello part becomes more virtuosic, as ascending double stops and passagework in octaves create an exciting peak before the movement ends in a surprisingly quiet manner.

The second movement is an elegiac Largo that Kabalevsky wrote in dedication to fallen Russian soldiers. The melody, although in B major, is based on a melancholy Russian folk song, and the movement is structured so that the cello part plays several lyrical stanzas of the melody. The solo part is accompanied by muted strings and there is a striking duo between the cello and the horns. Eventually the cello reaches a solo cadenza and the key is transformed from major into minor. This movement, like the first, has a very quiet ending.

The final movement is an Allegro Molto containing a set of variations based on another well-known Russian song. A lyrical clarinet line begins the movement before the cello enters with an emphatic melody. The melody slips quickly between agitation and lyricism, and during the lyrical parts various winds and brass in the orchestra take turns playing the melodic material from the cello's opening. This movement contains many beautiful, expressive moments that are peppered with variations of the more agitated material from the opening. The cello part is at times more virtuosic than in the previous two movements, growing in intensity until very fast notes lead to a spirited close.

Three of the most brilliant virtuoso display pieces in the symphonic literature all came from the tormented pen of Peter Tchaikovsky. These are his First Piano Concerto, his Violin Concerto, and this work for cello and orchestra. Done in the potentially tedious theme and variations format, the work begins with a simple theme and plumbs the depths and streaks to the heights of the capabilities of what is arguably the most beautiful and wide ranging of the stringed instruments of the orchestra.

The rococo theme itself is a simple one and if it tips its hat to the eighteenth century -- and Tchaikovsky's musical idol, Mozart -- it is thoroughly Tchaikovskyian and utterly Romantic. Each of the seven variations is skillfully crafted and none sounds contrived or forced -- always a potential trap in this form. Two expressive cadenzas further push the performance envelope of the cello and at least one variation is as powerfully mournful and expressive as anything the morose Russian ever composed. The work finally bursts forth into a joyous final variation and concludes with satisfying enthusiasm, but without overly produced bombast.

Rococo Variations were composed in short score near the end of 1876 for Wilhelm Fitzhagen, who was principal cellist at the Moscow Conservatory. Fitzhagen got a short score of the new variations so he could make the cello part idiomatic while Tchaikovsky was orchestrating the rest. This was introduced at a Moscow concert on November 30, 1877, when the composer was "recuperating" in Switzerland from the debacle of his one and only marriage earlier that year. He didn't know of revisions Fitzhagen made and presented to the publisher Jurgenson as "authorized." Tchaikovsky's own version had a brief introduction for strings before the theme itself, in two parts, then eight variations, and a coda. Fitzhagen added repeat marks to both halves of the theme, killed variation 8, rearranged the original order (to 1, 2, 7, 5, 6, 3, 4), and truncated the coda. Although biographer David Brown has damned this version as "deplorably corrupt," it remains charming, albeit less effective than the original, finally published in a 1956 Soviet edition of Tchaikovsky's complete works.

The genius in the work is the manner in which Tchaikovsky transforms the original theme into numerous and different personalities, each logical and effective. There is never a sense of stalling or contrivance, nor, in spite of the ferocious virtuoso demands in certain of the variations, of mere pyrotechnic display. It is the work of Tchaikovsky the musician and composer, not of the tormented and overwrought soul who could sometimes pound the listener into submission with emotional extremes. Those interested in beautiful and challenging works for cello and in hearing Tchaikovsky at his musical best should enjoy this piece immensely.

Kabalevsky Cello Concerto

Tchaikovsky Variations on the Rococo Theme

Daniel Shafran Cello

Kabalevsky : Conductor: Dmitri Kabalevsky
USSR Radio Symphony Orchestra
Date of Recording: 1952
Tchaikovsky :
Conductor: Kirill Kondrashin
Moscow Philharmonic Orchestra
Date of Recording: 1949

1. Kabalevsky: Cello Concerto No. 1 - Allegro 5:47
 2. Kabalevsky: Cello Concerto No. 1 - Largo 5:28
 3. Kabalevsky: Cello Concerto No. 1 - Allegretto 6:02
 4. Tchaikovsky: Variations on the Rococo Theme 18:41
- Total Time: 35:58

All tracks are recorded in monophonic



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