

Leopold Stokowski was one of the greatest conductors of all time. Born in London on April 18, 1882, he started his musical career as an organist. In 1903, he took the post of principal organist at St. James' Church in London, situated in a small side off the famous Piccadilly. Although only 21 years old, he became soon well-known and after two years received an offer from St. Bartholomew's Church in New York, which he accepted enthusiastically. The congregation loved him, particularly for his uncommon musical repertoire.

In 1909, the famous pianist Olga Samaroff made it possible for him to conduct a concert with the Cincinnati Symphony Orchestra on May 12, in which she was the soloist. The concert was a great success and Stokowski was instantly engaged for the next season. Despite triumphal successes, however, he left Cincinnati in 1911, due to internal quarrels. Back in Europe, he married Olga. In 1912, he returned to the United States, this time to the Philadelphia Orchestra, where he conducted his first concert on October 11. The Philadelphia Orchestra was then rather a middle-class orchestra but Stokowski improved its sound within short time. The result became later known as the Philadelphia Sound and was achieved with some unusual innovations. First, he allowed the strings free bowing, which means the string players were free to move their bows up and down as they pleased, rather than in unison. This produces a very warm, silky and vivid sound, as it had never been heard before. Stokowski also made several changes to the orchestra's seating arrangement to improve the transparency and clarity of the sound. But it was not only this what made him popular. He sometimes produced his concerts like a stage-play by placing light spots on him or his always baton-less conducting hands, by speeches to the audience and even once by hiding the orchestra behind a curtain. Stokowski always made a mystery of himself. Asked about his age, he would give 1887 as his year of birth instead of 1882. Throughout his whole life he spoke with a strange pseudo-east-European accent of which nobody ever had an idea where he, as a born Lodoner, could have it from.

In 1940, Stokowski made the famous film *Fantasia* together with Walt Disney, in which cartoon figures move in ballet-like sequences to classical music. The music for the film was recorded in eight-channel stereophony and surprised its spectators for both its visual and acoustical achievements. Stokowski also appeared in some other, rather slushy films, which are listed here.

His private life also brought him into the newspapers. He was married several times - once to the million heiress Gloria Vanderbilt - and had a well-publicized affair with Greta Garbo.

Musically, he provoked a still-lasting controversy over his bombastic symphonic transcriptions of Bach works, which are considered sacrilege by baroque purists. He also had no inhibitions about making changes to the scores of other great masters, such as Beethoven or Tchaikovsky, if this served the work in any way. He also made his own orchestral arrangements of other works, such as Mussorgski's *Pictures at an Exhibition* and *A Night on the Bare Mountain* or Debussy's *La cathédrale engloutie*. Stokowski left Philadelphia in 1941, turning to various musical projects. He had many engagements as guest conductor all over the world and founded several orchestras, such as *The All-American Youth Orchestra*, *The American Symphony Orchestra*, *The Symphony of the Air* and "His" *Symphony Orchestra* (for recording sessions with Capitol Records).

With a legendary concert on June 14, 1972, Stokowski celebrated the sixtieth anniversary of his first appearance with the London Symphony Orchestra. Stokowski was always very interested in improving the sound quality of recording media. Therefore, it is a great luck for the record lover that he became so old. He made still excellent (perhaps even his best) stereo recordings in his higher age. The difference between his recordings and those of other conductors is simply that he is a magician. When you hear Stokowski, suddenly the music begins to develop its own life. The sound is usually richer than everywhere else and so intense that you can't believe it is produced by a hundred people and not by only one. It is said that Stokowski kept on playing the organ his whole life: through the orchestra.

At 94, he was optimistic enough to sign a five years contract with Columbia Records. Unfortunately, this could not avert his destiny. He died on September 13, 1977, at the age of 95 in his house in Nether Wallop, Hampshire, England. It was the day on which he was to record Rachmaninov's *Second Symphony*, a wonderful work he never recorded commercially. Stokowski was buried at Marylebone Cemetery, East Finchley, in north London. Should you wish to visit his grave, you will find it at position D 10 147.



Tchaikovsky

Francesca da Rimini

Fantasy After Dante for Orchestra

Hamlet

Fantasy-Overture

Leopold Stokowski
The Stadium Symphony Orchestra Of New York

In 1876, Tchaikovsky was persuaded by a literary critic and friend from his conservatory days, Hermann Laroche, to write an opera based on a tale in Dante's *Divine Comedy* about Paolo and Francesca of Rimini. The story intrigued Tchaikovsky: Francesca and Paolo are lost souls in hell, owing to their adulterous affair (which was an actual historical event). The affair grew out of the latter's efforts to secure Francesca's hand in marriage, not for himself but for his unattractive hunchback brother, Gianciotto, who, after his marriage to Francesca, catches the pair in lovemaking and has them executed. Francesca narrates the circumstances of their painful afterlife in Dante's poetic account.

Plans for the opera fell through, however, and Tchaikovsky, at the behest of his brother Modest, wrote this symphonic fantasy inspired by the story. The dark opening, marked *Andante lugubre*, depicts the mood and scenery at the doorway to Hell, above which an inscription reads, "Abandon all hope, you who enter here." Tchaikovsky brilliantly captures the sounds and imagery associated with the whirlwind that carries lost souls, including Francesca and Paolo. The music here is agitated, with the strings swirling angrily and a sense of desperation permeating the awful feeling of ineluctable descent. The *Allegro vivo* marking here may well be a deliberately ironic choice by the composer, for the *vivo* derivatives of "spirited" and "lively" are hardly appropriate to this frenzied grimness.

After this section is presented a second time, Tchaikovsky introduces a tranquil but yearning love theme on clarinet. Why is such a lovely melody emerging from these hellish environs? Francesca's first words in her narration are, "There is no greater pain than happiness recalled in a time of misery." The strings take up the beautiful melody and the mood of sweet regret almost makes the listener forget the dark character of the preceding section.

Eventually the whirlwind music from the opening returns to depict the lovers being swept up again, perpetuating their chastisement of seeing but never communicating or touching each other. The music ends in dramatic fashion, as ten emphatic chords, punctuated by the crashing gong, bring the work to rousing, chilling conclusion.

There has been some confusion concerning the identity of this Hamlet. Tchaikovsky was commissioned to compose incidental music for a St. Petersburg staging of Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, but failed to meet the deadline. Instead, he produced this tone poem in 1888, assigning the opus number 67. Three years later, he did compose music for the play, designating that effort Op. 67a. Some catalogs, however, have listed the fantasy overture as Op. 67a and the incidental music as Op. 67b, and both, of course, are incorrect.

This colorful tone poem differs from most of Tchaikovsky's others in that rather than portraying events, it depicts the character of Hamlet. There is a strong similarity between the opening theme here and the one that launches the composer's *Manfred Symphony* (1885). Some have also pointed out a structural similarity between *Hamlet* and Strauss' *Don Juan* (1889).

This Tchaikovsky work is powerfully dramatic and brilliantly scored, but Shakespeare's Danish Prince does not quite inspire the composer the way his teenage lovers Romeo and Juliet had. Still, the themes here are attractive, especially the mellow, somewhat lonely melody on oboe, and the work is generally well crafted. In the end, this is a solid but minor composition from Tchaikovsky's pen. It lasts about 17 to 18 minutes in a typical performance.

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1 Francesca da Rimini: Fantasy After Dante for Orchestra, Opus 32 23:12

2 Hamlet: Fantasy-Overture, Opus 67 19:17

Recorded by the Everest / Belock Recording Co. 1958

Directed By – Raoul Poliakin

Engineer - Aaron Nathanson

Technician – Robert Engler



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