THE SANTA BARBARA
SYMPHONY
Nir Kabaretti, Music & Artistic Director

TCHAIKOVSKY IMMERSION

PROGRAM NOTES

CLARINET II

Homage to Tchaikovsky (2001)
by Emma Lou Diemer (Kansas City, MO 1927 – Santa Barbara 2024)

HOMAGE TO TCHAIKOVSKY is the result of a commission from the Santa Barbara Symphony and its conductor, Gisèle Ben-Dor. The symphony's manager, Rob Birman, called me in the summer of 2000 to ask if I would write a short, five-to-eight-minute opening work for the May 12 and 13, 2001 concerts, whose theme was to be "Mostly Tchaikovsky."

So, with these guidelines, and knowing the tremendous talents and abilities of Gisèle Ben-Dor and our symphony, I pondered the commission for awhile and thought it appropriate to become in a direct way part of the concerts' theme, "Mostly Tchaikovsky." Tchaikovsky was a great melodist, he was a colorful orchestrator, his music has a neoclassic clarity and directness. Those are qualities that many of us appreciate in the music of any period, and they account for much of Tchaikovsky's appeal.

HOMAGE TO TCHAIKOVSKY uses the orchestration of the other works on the concert, the Third Symphony and the First Piano Concerto. Therefore, there is not the plethora of percussion instruments that grace many a contemporary work, only timpani, plus the woodwinds, brass, and strings of what is called a "standard" orchestra.

I decided to do something I have never done before in symphonic music: take a few actual motives from another composer's music and develop them within a work of my own. This practice, incidentally, was prevalent in earlier periods of music, and other composers of our time have engaged in it, so there is nothing revolutionary or "verboten" about it. I chose a dozen or so motives from some of Tchaikovsky's compositions and built a seven-minute overture around them. It seemed advisable in such a brief work to keep the mood light and lively, eschewing the heart-breaking pathos of which he was a master. There are motives from The Nutcracker, the Fourth, Fifth, and Sixth Symphonies, the song "None but the Lonely Heart," Romeo and Juliet, and a tiny allusion near the end to the opening chords of the B-flat minor Piano Concerto. There are some original themes, too, and the whole short piece does not come across, I hope, as a work by Tchaikovsky, but one by a twenty-first-century composer who looks back appreciatively on the melodic gifts of a nineteenth-century writer of music.

Concierto de Aranjuez (1939)
by Joaquín Rodrigo (Sagunto, Spain, 1901 – Madrid, 1999)

No Spanish composer in the second half of the twentieth century had a worldwide reputation that came close to Joaquín Rodrigo's. During a composing life spanning about six decades, Rodrigo upheld the Spanish national tradition of Albéniz, Granados, and Falla in a significant body of instrumental and vocal works; his greatest success came with the Concierto de Aranjuez, written when he was in his late thirties.

Rodrigo, who lost his eyesight at the age of three as a result of complications from diphtheria, lived in Paris through most of the 1930s and did not return to Spain until 1939, the year the Spanish Civil War ended and World War II broke out. The next year, Concierto de Aranjuez was performed in Barcelona, and Rodrigo's fame as the leading Spanish composer of the time was established. In 1991, King Juan Carlos elevated Rodrigo to the ranks of Spanish nobility and gave him the title Marqués de los Jardines de Aranjuez ("Marquis of the Gardens of Aranjuez").

The marriage of the guitar, Spain's national instrument, to a symphony orchestra proved a winning combination in Concierto de Aranjuez, which was followed by Fantasia para un gentilhombre and several other concertos for one or more guitars.

The composer provided the following explanatory notes on his piece:

> The Concierto de Aranjuez takes its title from the famous royal site 50 kilometers from Madrid on the road to Andalusia. It was a place particularly favored by the Bourbons. Although the piece is not programmatic, it was my intention to evoke a certain period in the life of Aranjuez—the end of the eighteenth century and the beginning of the nineteenth. It was an epoch subtly characterized by majas [beautiful young women] and bullfighters, and by Spanish-American tunes….In its melody lingers the perfume of the magnolias, the song of birds and the whisper of fountains….the hidden breeze that stirs the tree tops in the parks that surround the Baroque Palace, and it only wishes to be as agile as a butterfly, and as precise as the pass of a matador's cape.

Concierto de Aranjuez (1939)

by Joaquín Rodrigo (Sagunto, Spain, 1901 – Madrid, 1999)

The composer's wife, the Turkish pianist Victoria Kamhi, added: "It was an evocation of our honeymoon when we walked in the park at Aranjuez…"

Throughout the concerto, Rodrigo took great care to keep the orchestral accompaniment thin so as not to overshadow the guitar; tutti sonorities are reserved for moments when the soloist pauses. Nevertheless, there is considerable variety in the orchestral timbres. The first movement (Allegro con spirito) opens with the guitar strumming a simple pattern with a characteristic rhythmic contraction. The main lyric ideas are given to the orchestra (including a solo cello); the guitar part is, as the composer said, "as agile as a butterfly." The second movement (Adagio) opens with an improvisatory theme of supreme beauty, played in alternation by the English horn and the guitar, which adorns the melody with some exquisite virtuosic figurations. This movement includes a brilliant cadenza, after which the opening theme returns in the splendor of the full orchestra. The last movement (Allegro gentile) is based on a folk-like melody whose meter alternates between 3/4 and 2/4. It is presented in many different instrumentations, displaying the virtuosity of the guitarist but also giving several orchestral players a chance to shine. The ending, with its understated grace, comes as something of a surprise.

Symphony No. 4 in F minor, Op. 36 (1878)
by Piotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky (Kamsko-Votkinsk, Russia, 1840 – St. Petersburg, 1893)

Those of us ever curious about what composers wanted to express with their music may think we have all the answers in Tchaikovsky's Fourth Symphony. After all, didn't the composer write down a detailed program about the meaning of each movement in his work? Everyone who loves Tchaikovsky and the Fourth Symphony in particular should know this fascinating document, contained in a letter dated March 1, 1878, and written by the composer to his friend and benefactor Nadezhda von Meck (to whom the symphony is dedicated). In the original, Tchaikovsky even included several musical examples to illustrate his points.

> In our symphony, there is a programme (that is, the possibility of explaining in words what it seeks to express, and to you and you alone I can and wish to indicate the meaning both of the work as a whole, and of its individual parts. Of course, I can do this here only in general terms).
>
> The introduction is the kernel of the whole symphony, without question its main idea. This is Fate, the force of destiny, which ever prevents our pursuit of happiness from reaching its goal, which jealously stands watch lest our peace and well-being be full and cloudless, which hangs like the sword of Damocles over our heads and constantly, ceaselessly poisons our souls. It is invincible, inescapable. One can only resign oneself and lament fruitlessly. The disconsolate and despairing feeling grows ever stronger and more intense. Would it not be better to turn away from reality and immerse oneself in dreams? O joy! A sweet, tender dream has appeared. A bright, beneficent human form flits by and beckons us on. How wonderful! How distant now is the sound of the implacable first theme! Dreams little by little have taken over the soul. All that dark and bleak is forgotten. There it is, there it is—happiness!
>
> But no! These were only dreams, and Fate awakens us from them. And thus, all life is the ceaseless alternation of bitter reality with evanescent visions and dreamed-of happiness….There is no refuge. We are buffeted about by this sea until it seizes us and pulls us down to the bottom. There you have roughly the program of the first movement.
>
> The second movement of the symphony expresses a different aspect of sorrow, that melancholy feeling that arises in the evening as you sit alone, worn out from your labors. You've picked up a book, but it has fallen from your hands. A whole procession of

Symphony No. 4 in F minor, Op. 36 (1878)
by Piotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky (Kamsko-Votkinsk, Russia, 1840 – St. Petersburg, 1893)

> The third movement does not express definite feelings. These are, rather, capricious arabesques, fugitive images that pass through one's mind when one has had a little wine to drink and is feeling the first effects of intoxication. At heart, one is neither merry nor sad. One's mind is a blank: The imagination has free rein and it has come up with these strange and inexplicable designs….Among theme all at once you recognize a tipsy peasant and a street song….Then somewhere in the distance, a military parade goes by. These are the completely unrelated images that pass through one's head as one is about to fall asleep. They have nothing in common with reality; they are strange, wild and incoherent…
>
> The fourth movement. If you can find no impulse for joy within yourself, look at others. Go out among the people. See how well they know how to rejoice and give themselves up utterly to glad feelings. But hardly have you succeeded in forgetting yourself and enjoying the spectacle of others' joys, when tireless Fate reappears and insinuates itself. But the others pay no heed. They do not even look around to see you standing there, lonely and depressed. Oh, how merry they are! And how fortunate, that all their feelings are direct and simple. Never say that all the world is sad. You have only yourself to blame. There are joys, strong through simple. Why not rejoice through the joys of others? One can live that way, after all.

Yet no sooner had Tchaikovsky written down these thoughts than he felt them to be woefully inadequate. So he added the following post-script to his letter:

> Just as I was putting my letter into the envelope I began to read it again, and to feel misgivings as to the confused and incomplete program that I am sending you. For the first time in my life I have attempted to put my musical thoughts and forms into words and phrases. I have not been very successful. I was horribly out of spirits all the time I was composing this symphony last winter, and this was a true echo of my feelings at the time. But only an echo. How is it possible to reproduce it in clear and definite language? I do not know. I have already forgotten a good deal. Only the general impression of my passionate and sorrowful experiences has remained…

TCHAIKOVSKY IMMERSION

Symphony No. 4 in F minor, Op. 36 (1878)
by Piotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky (Kamsko-Votkinsk, Russia, 1840 – St. Petersburg, 1893)

Tchaikovsky's dilemma has been keenly felt ever since by everyone trying to explain music in words, whether it is their own music or someone else's. Although it seems that it cannot be done, neither can it be avoided. Instead of engaging in endless (and fruitless) polemics about "program music" and "absolute music," then, we should simply remember that programs, even if provided by the composer, are no more and no less than a first approach to the music; they certainly don't even begin to explain what the composer has really accomplished.

The feelings described in Tchaikovsky's program, then, seem to be no more than a starting point for the composer's musical imagination. In addition, some of the images Tchaikovsky used derive from musical sources in the first place: when he spoke about "Fate," he didn't mean "Fate" in general but "Fate" as it was said to have been portrayed in Beethoven's Fifth Symphony. (As Tchaikovsky wrote in the same letter to Mme von Meck, "The work is patterned after Beethoven's Fifth, not as to musical content, but as to the basic idea".) He may have been thinking, as well, of his destroyed early symphonic fantasy Fatum. Similarly, when he said "go out among the people," he probably thought about the people rejoicing to the sound of folk dances in Beethoven's Sixth, or perhaps about the millions embraced by Beethoven in his Ninth. These seemingly extra-musical images clearly came to Tchaikovsky filtered through a musical tradition in which they were thought to have found expression.

In his finale, Tchaikovsky "embraced the millions" by quoting the Russian folksong "In the fields there stands a birch tree." Commentators have made much of the extra two beats Tchaikovsky added to the tune to make its rhythmic structure more regular; that is something his erstwhile mentor Mily Balakirev, who had used the same melody earlier in an overture, had not done. But then, Balakirev never subjected the folksong to nearly as many ingenious transformations as did Tchaikovsky who, combining "The Birch-tree" with a vigorous and dynamic first thematic group, developed one of his most rousing symphonic finales out of that simple little song.

Symphony No. 4 in F minor, Op. 36 (1878)
by Piotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky (Kamsko-Votkinsk, Russia, 1840 – St. Petersburg, 1893)

Of course, the Fourth Symphony's program had a more immediate personal level, one that Tchaikovsky didn't need to spell out to his friend. Mme von Meck knew all about the turmoil Tchaikovsky had gone through at the time of writing the symphony: 1877 was the year of his disastrous marriage to Antonina Milyukova, which only lasted a few days. Tchaikovsky's correspondence with Nadezhda von Meck (he was never to meet her in person) also began in 1877; the knowledge that there was someone who could truly understand him only made the outburst of his emotions more intense. Still, even here we cannot separate the music from the verbalized emotions, or tell which came first.

Ultimately, what makes Tchaikovsky's Fourth a masterpiece is neither the presence of a program nor the successful musical expression of one. Its impact is due, rather, to the sheer musical power of its themes, the force with which they are developed, and the boundless imagination displayed in tonality, rhythm, orchestration, and musical character.