

Program Notes

by

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What better way to begin the new orchestral season than by enjoying four amazing works. Verdi and Tchaikovsky deal with *fate* in their respective manners, each richly powerful. Brackett's work will be immediately familiar, and Bruch will take us on a truly sublime musical journey. Together these four composers will speak to our souls in contrasting ways, ways that surely are cause for celebration.

Overture to *La forza del destino* by Giuseppe Verdi (1813-1901). Two things tie this composition to Tchaikovsky. First, both composers used a *fate* theme (as did Beethoven in his Fifth Symphony; in Beethoven's words, "so knocks Fate at the door"). Second, Verdi's 1862 opera was commissioned by the Imperial Mariinsky Theatre hence it was premiered in St. Petersburg, and Tchaikovsky attended a performance. He did not hear the overture as we know it for it was not completed until 1869. The title of Verdi's opera is generally badly translated as "*The Force of Destiny*" but more literally it means "*The Power of Fate*". Rather than anticipating the interwoven themes in the rambling tragedy, the overture evokes the opera's atmosphere. This finest of all of Verdi's symphonic overtures opens with a statement of Verdi's *fate* motif: three powerful notes (repeated).

Simple Gifts by Joseph Brackett (1797–1882), arranged by Catherine Molina. Some people incorrectly think this was a traditional Celtic song when in fact both the music and the one verse original lyrics were written in 1848 by Joseph Brackett, a life-long resident of Maine and an Elder in the Shaker Church. Nineteenth Century Shaker music manuscripts call it *Simple Gifts* or *Tis the gift to be simple*. The song celebrates one of the core principles of Shaker belief: simplicity. It was not a hymn but a dance song (in which the original last three lines of the song are dance instructions) that was sung while dancing during worship services. The song was largely unknown outside Shaker communities until Aaron Copland made it famous by his use of it in his 1944 ballet score *Appalachian Spring*. Brackett's words and tune have since been adapted or arranged by numerous composers and folk singers. Today's rendition of the tune has been arranged by the GSO's principal violist, Catherine Molina.

Violin Concerto No. 1 in G minor by Max Bruch (1830-1920). The most performed violin concertos are by Beethoven, Mendelssohn, Bruch, and Brahms. The great Hungarian violinist Joseph Joachim performed all four concertos. When aged 13, his May 1844 performance of Beethoven's concerto with the London Philharmonic conducted by Mendelssohn was a rousing success. He was the second player to perform Mendelssohn's concerto. And he premiered the concertos by Bruch (i.e., a revision that was aided by Joachim after a first version was deemed to be inadequate) and Brahms. Fascinatingly, of these four works, Joachim said that Bruch's concerto was "the richest and the most seductive."

When aged nine Bruch wrote a song for his mother's birthday. He thereby found his passion, and he never looked back. He had a long career as a teacher, composer, and conductor. He held musical posts in several German cities, Liverpool in England, and he also worked

privately. In his later years he taught composition in Berlin until his retirement in 1910.

Bruch is best known today for just three works (out of more than 200): the concerto we are to hear today; the delightful *Scottish Fantasy for Violin and Orchestra* (which includes a lively tune made famous by Robert Burns); and the hauntingly beautiful *Kol Nidrei*, subtitled “Adagio on Hebrew Melodies for Violoncello and Orchestra” that is set for the eve of Yom Kippur (“Day of Atonement”). Bruch was a Protestant, not Jewish, but his *Kol Nidrei* led the Nazis to ban all his works.

The brief opening timpani roll and sombre woodwinds set the stage for an impassioned statement on the solo violin that eloquently establishes the mood of the work. This first movement (*adagio moderato*) continues, as the violin introduces new themes that are then explored in a series of developments. Following a splendid full orchestral *tutti* the violin restates the opening theme and so readies the listener for the transition to the next movement, which follows without a break. The sublime slower (*adagio*) second movement contains four themes. Three are introduced by the violin while the fourth is announced by the French Horn and woodwinds before being taken over by the soloist. The final movement (*allegro energico*) is dance-like (in a Hungarian style, which Brahms copied when he wrote his violin concerto) that with delightful fluidity explores the various themes before reaching an exciting Gypsy-like *presto* finale.

Buried in Berlin-Schöneberg’s Old St. Matthäus churchyard, Bruch’s gravestone reads, “Music is the language of God”.

Symphony No. 4 by **Pyotr Ilich Tchaikovsky** (1840-1893). Tchaikovsky’s music exhibits romance and bright delights as well as military and other celebrations which reflect a sense of joy and of great accomplishments. Yet he also drew upon his personal pain and anguish, love and grief in such profound ways that his music marks him as a pre-eminent composer of the human soul.

He began piano lessons when aged five, when he also began to compose simple tunes. Instructed by the family governess, by age six he was fluent in French and German. When he was eight, the family moved nearly 2,000 kms from the small town of Votkinsk, lying to the east, to St. Petersburg but his father left them the following year. In 1850 he was taken to a performance of Glinka’s pioneering opera, *A Life of the Tsar*, which touched him deeply. Shortly thereafter, he was distraught (“one of the most horrible days”) when his mother departed the city, leaving him enrolled in the School of Jurisprudence. Two years later she died of cholera (“the first powerful grief I experienced”). While in the school for nine years he discovered a stability that he craved though his encounter there of homosexual practices may have led to or uncovered his personal “inclination” (Tchaikovsky’s own word). The latter tormented him all his life.

Graduating from the school, he became a clerk in the Ministry of Justice. During a leave, in 1861, he travelled to France, Belgium, England, and Germany. Once home and back at work, on the side he enrolled in Anton Rubenstein’s composition class. He ceased working at the ministry in 1863 when he had realized that he had to devote his life to music. Rubenstein found him pupils to teach thus he was able to support himself while studying at the conservatory. He studied hard there (flute, organ, and composition) and quickly stood out from the other students. His *Opus 1, No. 1 for piano* was composed in 1865 and later that year he conducted the conservatory orchestra in a performance of his *Overture in F*. Strangely, perhaps, Rubenstein thought the music “too Russian” yet Tchaikovsky was permitted to graduate from the conservatory with his diploma and a silver medal.

In January 1866 he moved to Moscow at the invitation of Nikolay Rubenstein, Anton's brother, to be the professor of harmony at what was soon to become the Moscow Conservatory. In the years to come he composed the ballets *Swan Lake*, *Sleeping Beauty*, and *The Nutcracker*; seven remarkable symphonies (numbers 1-6 and the *Manfred*); and many other masterworks. David Brown has observed, Tchaikovsky's "natural gifts, especially his genius for what he called the 'lyrical idea', the beautiful self-contained melody, gave his music a permanent appeal."

In 1877 Tchaikovsky began a strange relationship with a wealthy widow, Nadezhda von Meck. At her insistence they did not meet but so enamoured was she with his music that for many years she gave him a significant monthly stipend. Letters between them survive, including some that deal with the Symphony No. 4. With her permission he dedicated the work "to my best friend," without identifying her by name for she demanded anonymity. Much of the following text is drawn from that correspondence.

Tchaikovsky wrote, "Our symphony progresses. The first movement will give me a great deal of trouble with respect to orchestration. It is very long and complicated; at the same time I consider it the best movement, The three remaining movements are very simple, and it will be easy and pleasant to orchestrate them." To imply mere simplicity to the second, third and fourth movements is, of course, ridiculous, as we will hear, but the first movement is indeed the longest and most complicated.

Von Meck asked him to explain the music's meaning but he was reluctant to do so. Why? To his pupil, Sergey Taneyev, he wrote: "Of course my symphony is programmatic, but it would be impossible to give the program in words.... Ought not a symphony express all those things for which words cannot be found but which nevertheless arise in the heart and cry out for expression?"

Von Meck persisted so finally Tchaikovsky reluctantly sent her the following: "The introduction is the seed of the whole symphony, undoubtedly the central theme. This is *Fate*: that fateful force which prevents the impulse to happiness from fully achieving its goal, which jealously ensures that peace and well-being shall not be attained completely and in unclouded form, which hangs above us like the sword of Damocles, constantly and unwaveringly poisoning the soul. It is a force not to be overcome, merely endured. Faced with bleak and hopeless feelings, is it not good to escape into one's sweet dreams? This can feel good! How distant now seems the obsessive first theme of the *Allegro*.... No! These were but dreams; *Fate* wakes us from them. Thus, all life is an unbroken alternation of harsh reality with fleeting dreams and visions of happiness.... No escape exists.... We can but drift upon that sea until it engulfs and submerges us in its depths. That roughly, is the programme of the first movement." Whew! Yes, complicated! This movement surely is a reflection of the emotional turmoil we know Tchaikovsky was experiencing at that time. The *fate* theme opens the work, in a mighty but dour brass fanfare that is central to the development of the symphony. Listen for its return at various points in the work, notably in the final movement when it is quickly set aside.

The second movement, which opens with a plaintive oboe solo, "expresses another aspect of sadness, that melancholy feeling which comes in the evening after the day's toil. Memories abound but it is sad so much is now in the past. Some memories are painful, reflecting irreparable losses. All this is now far distant. It is both sad, yet somehow sweet, to be immersed in the past." This movement shifts perfectly from sadness to a brighter feeling, which is taken even further in the next movement.

The witty third movement is a *tour-de-force* for the strings, plucked rather than bowed because, wrote Tchaikovsky, "if you bowed it, it would lose everything." The movement

expresses no specific feeling but contains fleeting images “that can sweep the imagination after drinking a little wine and feeling the first phases of intoxication.... Thinking about nothing in particular, giving free reign to the imagination. Strange pictures emerge, of drunken peasants and a street song, [then] in the distance, a military procession passes. [These] images sweep through your head as you fall asleep. They have nothing in common with reality; they are strange, wild and disjointed.”

The final movement opens in a fiery manner before we hear a lovely theme based on a folk tune, “In the Field a Birch Tree Stood”. Eventually the *fate* theme returns only to be overcome and, ultimately, triumph reigns. Of this movement Tchaikovsky wrote, “If within yourself you find no reason for joy, then look at others. Look to them and see how they enjoy themselves, even as they surrender wholeheartedly to joyful feelings. [But] hardly have you managed to forget yourself, and be carried away by the spectacle of the joy of others, [when] irrepressible *fate* appears again and reminds you of yourself.... You are solitary and sad.... You have only yourself to blame. [However,] do not reproach yourself, and do not say that everything in this world is sad. Joy is a simple but powerful force. Rejoice in the rejoicing of others. To live is still possible.”