

## Piano Concerto No. 2 in G Major, Op. 44

Peter Ilyich Tchaikovsky

(1840–1893)

While Tchaikovsky's *Piano Concerto No. 1 in B-flat minor* has become a staple of the piano-orchestral repertoire and frequently required by piano competitions, the composer's other works for piano and orchestra are infrequently played. Tchaikovsky had a special fondness for his second piano concerto; so did the great choreographer George Balanchine, who set his extravagant *Ballet Imperial* to the score. The grandiose rhetoric of this concerto initially confused many of its early interpreters. Tchaikovsky's melodic gifts burn bright in a work replete with color and flashy keyboard displays.

Tchaikovsky began work on the concerto in 1879 at his sister's estate at Kamenka, substantially completing the score in Paris and Rome in the spring of 1879. He dedicated the work to the pianist and teacher Nikolai Rubinstein out of gratitude "for his magnificent playing of my First Concerto..which left me in utter rapture." Although first expressing enthusiasm for the new work, Rubinstein (after a two-piano reading session with Tchaikovsky's pupil Sergei Taneyev) found the piece too episodic. He expressed particular displeasure with the violin and cello solo parts in the second movement. Plans for Rubinstein to premiere the work never materialized after the pianist died of consumption in Paris. The first performance, surprisingly, took place in New York on November 12, 1881 with British pianist Madeleine Schiller as soloist and Theodore Thomas conducting. Taneyev introduced the piece to Russia on May 18, 1882 at the opening concert of the Moscow Industrial and Cultural Exhibition, composer Anton Rubinstein (Nikolai's brother) conducting. Tchaikovsky defended the work against criticism of its length and structure but made three cuts for performances by Russian pianist Vasily Sapelnikov in 1888 in St. Petersburg, Prague and Moscow. In 1897 Tchaikovsky's student and friend Alexander Siloti (later a professor at New York's Juilliard School of Music) published a revised edition with additional cuts and changes in the keyboard-orchestral writing of the second movement.

The *Allegro brillante e molto vivace* commences with a full orchestral statement of an exciting, balletic theme which is taken up by the piano. After a cadenza, the second theme emerges. These themes are unusually thoroughly developed before a modulation to a minor key prior to a concluding flourish in the original G major. With its solos for violin and cello, the *Andante non troppo* might be classified as orchestral chamber music. An aristocratic melody of typical Tchaikovskyan yearning dominates this beautiful movement. A vigorous, dance like theme is introduced by the piano at the outset of the *Allegro con fuoco* finale. Two subsequent subjects are stated before this concise movements rockets to a dazzling coda. Despite initial criticism of the score's eccentricities, Tchaikovsky's second piano concerto is a vibrant display piece, filled with wonderful melodies and imaginative piano-orchestral writing — an underrated Tchaikovsky gem!

**Coronation March**  
Peter Ilyich Tchaikovsky  
(1840–1893)

The *Coronation March* was commissioned by the City of Moscow in 1883 for festivities surrounding the ascent of a new Czar to the Russian throne. Coronations in the Czarist era often brought commissioned “occasion pieces” by famous composers. (This practice even continued into the early Soviet era when Glazunov was tapped to write several such works.) A generally festive score with a rousing principle theme, the *Coronation March's* secondary subject is broadly lyrical in the manner of themes from Tchaikovsky's *Third Symphony*.

**March Slave, Op. 31**  
Peter Ilyich Tchaikovsky  
(1840–1893)

The war between Serbia and Turkey in 1876 brought about a rising tide of Pan Slavic nationalism within Russia. Tchaikovsky responded by composing *March Slave* (original title: *Serbo-Russian March*) for a benefit concert for soldiers wounded in the war (a prelude to the larger war between Russia and Turkey) on November 5, 1876 in Moscow. Tchaikovsky recorded the audience's tumultuous reaction: “The whole audience sprang up. Many climbed onto their seats. Bravos mixed in with cries of hurrah...Many in the hall wept.”

The march begins with the principle subject, at first played with dirge like solemnity but later blazing with martial splendor in the brass. Tchaikovsky utilized several Serbian folk tunes as well as the Czarist anthem “God Save the Czar.” (He would again feature the anthem — to brilliant effect — in the 1812 Overture, composed in the early 1880s.) Although the work is not a tone poem per se, Tchaikovsky paints a vivid musical impression of battle and ultimate victory, the final jubilant pages resounding with the full resources of the orchestra.

**Waltz from Eugene Onegin**  
Peter Ilyich Tchaikovsky  
(1840–1893)

**Tchaikovsky's greatest artistic desire was to be a successful opera composer. Of his numerous attempts, *Eugene Onegin* and *Pique Dame* were his most successful operas.** Both works, based on scenarios by the poet-dramatist Pushkin, continue to hold a place in the repertoire today. Tchaikovsky's exceptional skills as a composer of ballet enliven the dance sequences of his operas.

*Eugene Onegin* is the story of Tatiana, a country girl, and her unrequited love for Eugene Onegin, a world weary cynic. When, years later, Onegin eventually realizes his mistake and declares his love for her, it is too late. Tatiana has married into the aristocracy and, dutifully, rejects Onegin. The ballet scenes provide lively contrast to the heartbreaking emotions that sweep through the opera's intensely dramatic pages.

The waltz scene opens Act II, a party at a country estate. A vigorous melody of Russian grandeur dominates the waltz which features several more subdued contrasting episodes. This joyous dance music precipitates one of the opera's most tragic events — an argument between Onegin and his friend the poet

Lensky. In the inevitable duel, Onegin kills his friend.

Tchaikovsky conducted the opera's premiere in 1879 at the Maly Theater in Moscow. Two years later — 1881 — *Eugene Onegin* was enthusiastically greeted at its initial performance by the Bolshoi Opera. Gustav Mahler was an enthusiastic champion of this opera. He conducted the German premiere (in Tchaikovsky's presence) in Hamburg in 1892 and introduced it to Vienna in 1897 during his legendary reign as director of the Vienna Court Opera. Sir Henry Wood, a friend of Brahms and Dvořák and champion of many British composers, led the first London performances in 1892.

Waltz from ***Swan Lake***,  
**Act I, No. 2**  
Peter Ilyich Tchaikovsky  
(1840–1893)

Occasionally, through a confluence of circumstances, a great composer and choreographer become an artistic team that jointly produce a series of masterworks of the music-dance repertoire: Leonid Lavrovsky and Sergei Prokofiev, George Balanchine and Igor Stravinsky and — perhaps the first such collaboration — Marius Petipa and Peter Ilyich Tchaikovsky.

Petipa, the director of ballet and principal choreographer of the Imperial Mariinsky Theater of St. Petersburg, was the most important figure in 19th century Russian dance. After a series of collaborations with such comparatively minor composers as Leon Minkus and Ricardo Drigo (his music director in St. Petersburg), Petipa sought out Tchaikovsky. *Swan Lake* was the first project they discussed. Petipa largely conceived the fantastical libretto. Ultimately the first production of Tchaikovsky's completed score would take place in Moscow (rather than Petipa's St. Petersburg) at the Bolshoi Theater with choreography by an obscure ballet master. Petipa would continue his collaboration with the composer which resulted in the Mariinsky premieres of *The Sleeping Beauty* (1889) and *The Nutcracker* (1892).

Following Tchaikovsky's death, Petipa and his assistant Lev Ivanov would stage a new version of *Swan Lake* in 1895. This production featured a revised version of Tchaikovsky's original score by Drigo. (In addition to changing the order of the set pieces and reorchestrating much of Tchaikovsky's work, Drigo may also have composed some additional music that is attributed to Tchaikovsky.) In various revisions, the Petipa-Drigo edition is the version that is most frequently performed and that has established *Swan Lake* as a bona fide classic. Other choreographers have produced their own vision of the four act spectacle, attempting to return to Tchaikovsky's original score (i.e. George Balanchine's one act version and widely disseminated full length choreographic renditions by Yuri Grigorovich and Matthew Bourne.)

The Waltz occurs right at the beginning of the ballet in a scene at the Prince's Palace. This is one of Tchaikovsky's most alluring waltz melodies. The grand scale orchestration and regal form of this waltz (light years removed from the Viennese confections of Strauss or Lanner) suggest Imperial Russian ballet at its most spectacular.