

# Russian Romance

Friday, August 14, 2009 • 8 p.m.

## Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov

(born March 18, 1844; died June 21, 1908)

### Russian Easter Festival Overture (Op. 36, 1887-1888)

Of all the great composers to come from Russia, Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov ranks among the greatest and most renowned. He is credited as the “main architect” of what the musical world considers Russian music. In addition to his work as a composer, he was a renowned teacher who taught the likes of Alexander Glazunov, Igor Stravinsky and Sergei Prokofiev. He also wrote a text entitled *Principles of Orchestration*, which to this day is still a well-regarded text on the art of orchestration. As a composer, Rimsky-Korsakov wrote fifteen operas, numerous works for orchestra, including three complete symphonies and some chamber music. His most famous works for orchestra, *Capriccio Espagnol*, *Scheherazade* and *Russian Easter Festival Overture*, remain staples in the orchestral repertoire today.

Easter in Russia is quite different from what it is in the West. Not only do they celebrate it on a different day, but they also have different traditions. Naturally, a piece by a Russian composer will be radically different than one by a Westerner. Rimsky-Korsakov's overture depicts Easter with vitality and excitement, rather than the drab expressions of joy heard in the West during Easter. This overture also has hints of mystery and solemnity, in part due to the fact that Rimsky-Korsakov was trying to depict pagan and early Christian Russia. In his autobiography, *My Musical Life*, he provided us with program notes of his own:

This legendary and heathen side of the holiday, this transition from the gloomy and mysterious evening of Passion Saturday to the unbridled pagan-religious merry-making of Easter Sunday, is what I was eager to reproduce in my overture. . . . The rather lengthy slow introduction . . . on the theme “Let God arise” [woodwinds], alternating with the ecclesiastical melody “An angel cried out” [solo cello], appeared to me, in the beginning, as it were, the ancient prophecy of Isaiah of the Resurrection of Christ. The gloomy colors of the Andante lugubre seemed to depict the Holy Sepulchre that had shone with ineffable light at the moment of the Resurrection—in the transition to the Allegro of the overture. The beginning of the Allegro—the theme “Let them also that hate Him flee before Him”—led to the holiday mood of the Greek Orthodox service on Christ's matins; the solemn trumpet voice of the Archangel was replaced by a tonal reproduction of the joyous, almost dancelike tolling of bells, alternating now with the sexton's rapid reading and now with the conventional chant of the priest's reading the glad tidings of the Evangel. The Obikhod (a collection of Russian Orthodox canticles) theme, “Christ is arisen,” which forms a sort of subsidiary part of the overture, appears amid the trumpet blasts and the bell-tolling, constituting a triumphant coda.

Rimsky-Korsakov's mastery of orchestration is on full display in this piece. For instance, toward the beginning of the work, we hear the second theme in a solo cello, which is accompanied by harp, violin and flute. The accompaniment truly makes the cello's solo sparkle with colors it wouldn't otherwise contain. More examples of Rimsky-Korsakov's instrumentation skills exist throughout the piece. Interestingly, he himself was not a practicing Christian, but he relished opportunities to depict Christian festivals and celebrations. With this work, along with *Capriccio Espagnol* and *Scheherazade*, we hear Rimsky-Korsakov at the pinnacle of his orchestral abilities.

## Alexander Glazunov

(born August 10, 1865; died March 21, 1936)

### Violin Concerto in A minor (Op. 82, 1904)

- I. Moderato
- II. Andante sostenuto
- III. Allegro

Although not as well known as some of his Russian peers, Glazunov was nonetheless an excellent composer who successfully merged the Russian and European aesthetic in music. A pupil of Rimsky-Korsakov, Glazunov possessed the orchestral abilities of his teacher, along with lyricism similar to that of Tchaikovsky. His works include nine symphonies, several concerti (two for piano, one for violin, one for cello and one for alto saxophone), several other smaller orchestral pieces, music for ballet and theater, and a fair amount of chamber and solo piano music.

At heart, Glazunov was a Romantic composer; his music is frequently compared to that of Brahms. He remained faithful to the 19th century musical idiom, while some of his Russian peers pursued more Modernist techniques. This often led to his music being labeled as formal or overly academic, even though most of his works contain great expressive potential. The spirit of Russian Romanticism is fully expressed in his Violin Concerto.

Completed in 1904, this concerto was written while Glazunov was a professor at the St. Petersburg Conservatory. Shortly after the premiere in 1905, he was elected as the director of the conservatory. Glazunov's most famous works date from this period, including his Eighth Symphony and tonight's Violin Concerto. One interesting note about Glazunov: he remained in Russia after the October Revolution of 1917, one of the few Russian composers to do so (others, like Rachmaninoff and Prokofiev, fled to the United States).

The concerto's three movements are played without pause between them, and can be thought of as a lengthy sonata form. The soloist becomes the dominant voice almost immediately with a lengthy Romantic-type melody, full of longing and emotion. The second theme is somewhat sweeter, which then leads to an orchestral transition. The second movement features the full expressive potential of the violin. The melody here starts in the lowest register of the violin, but eventually winds up in highest, the soloist seemingly floating above the orchestra. This builds to a truly amazing cadenza for the violin soloist, which brings us back to the opening material, this time ignited with a faster tempo and further virtuosity. Glazunov's music may not have gained the fame of some of his fellow Russians, but after hearing tonight's concerto, you will agree that he was nonetheless a master composer.

## Pyotr Il'yich Tchaikovsky

(born May 7, 1840; died November 6, 1893)

### Symphony No. 6 in B minor, *Pathétique* (Op. 74, 1893)

I. Adagio - Allegro non troppo

II. Allegro con grazia

III. Allegro molto vivace

IV. Finale: Adagio lamentoso

On October 28, 1893, Tchaikovsky conducted the premiere of this symphony in St. Petersburg; the work was received with incomprehension, as its formal innovations and overwhelming emotional content stunned the public. On November 6 of the same year, he passed away, most likely succumbing to cholera. A week later, the symphony was performed again at a memorial concert, the hall shrouded in black. This time, the work was very well received, and the symphony quickly entered the regular performing repertoire.

Tchaikovsky ultimately is one of the most fascinating figures in musical history. There are numerous stories about his life which may or may not be true, but are nonetheless quite intriguing. For example, numerous correspondences with one of his patrons, Nadezhda von Meck, show a very interesting epistolary romance they cultivated over a course of 14 years. In all this time, they stayed true to a pact they made, which stated that they would never meet face to face. There is also the speculation that Tchaikovsky was a homosexual, which explains the censorship of his correspondences after his death.

At the time he died, Tchaikovsky was world renowned as a composer, so his sudden death came as a major shock to the musical world. Many suspicions were aroused in regards to the circumstances surrounding his illness. This, along with the tragic tone of the *Pathétique* Symphony, gave rise to a mystique about the composer's final days that still continues today. A Russian musicologist, Alexandra Orlova, has made the claim that Tchaikovsky had committed suicide by poisoning himself. Orlova goes on to say that he did so on the orders of his fellow alumni of the School of Jurisprudence, in order to cover up his alleged sexual advances to a young man of high birth. However, since this claim was made, it has been refuted by other musicologists rather convincingly.

The circumstances surrounding the composition of the *Pathétique* Symphony are also a tale worthy of Hollywood (it is surprising that there isn't a movie made about Tchaikovsky...). Just before he began work on this symphony, he had abandoned work on a different symphony, which was to be a programmatic work. He had been struggling for some time to write this work, but once he gave up on it, the decision was "irreversible." His failure to complete the work left without direction. He began to fear that he did not have the ability to write "pure music, that is, symphonic or chamber music." On the encouragement of Bob Davydov, his nephew, Tchaikovsky began work on a new symphony, and within two months, he had written what is probably his greatest work ever (also his last).

Tchaikovsky claimed that this new symphony also was programmatic in nature, but what exactly it was about, he never told anyone. He wrote to his nephew that the program "will remain a mystery to everyone—let them guess." Many music scholars and enthusiasts have tried to come up with the program for this work, with ideas ranging from his epitaph, to an expression of his unfulfilled romances, to life's aspirations and disappointments.

The work begins with a low bassoon sounding over low strings in a very mournful tone. This tone is retained throughout the first movement. The main theme of the movement is perhaps one of Tchaikovsky's greatest melodies, and it gradually fades away (the dynamic marking eventually goes all the way down to sextuple *piano*, or *pppppp*). This main theme is then developed in a quite genius manner, as the melody careens in and out of various sections of the orchestra.

The middle two movements are substantially more relaxed in character. The second movement is a tuneful waltz, set in 5/4 time (rather than the traditional 3/4). This rhythmic device makes the waltz impossible to dance to. The third movement is a beautifully scored march, with a hint of melancholy lingering over it throughout.

The finale begins with bombast, something Tchaikovsky was quite famous for, yet the movement quickly enters back into the somber realm of most of the rest of the piece. After a lighter theme in the violins, the mood continuously gets grimmer and grimmer, until the music feels like it might explode with intensity. After a rather large climax, the movement winds down; we hear a single tam-tam note and the work begins its descent to nothing. This is a work of intense emotion and profound tragedy. It is truly the epitome of the Russian Romantic style.

**Program notes by Mark Knippel**

