

PROGRAM NOTES by Paul Schiavo

PIOTR ILYICH TCHAIKOVSKY

Violin Concerto in D major, Op. 35

BORN: May 7, 1840, in Kamsko-Votkinsk, Russia

DIED: November 6, 1893, in Saint Petersburg

WORK COMPOSED: 1878

WORLD PREMIERE: December 4, 1881, in Vienna. Adolf Brodsky was the soloist, and Hans Richter conducted the Vienna Philharmonic Orchestra.

Tchaikovsky wrote his Violin Concerto in the spring of 1878, immediately after completing his Fourth Symphony, a work of strongly tragic cast. Yet the concerto reveals no sense of the anguish and struggle that mark the symphony. Indeed, Tchaikovsky wrote of the new piece: "The first movement of the Violin Concerto is ready; tomorrow I begin the second. From the day I began to write it [a] favorable mood has not left me. In such a spiritual state composition loses all aspect of labor — it is a continuous delight."

Completion of the concerto progressed quickly, thanks in part to assistance from a fine violinist, Yosif Kotek, who played over the solo part as Tchaikovsky composed it. But, perhaps daunted by the music's challenges, neither Kotek nor the famous Hungarian-born virtuoso Leopold Auer, to whom Tchaikovsky intended to dedicate the concerto, would perform it in public. Tchaikovsky was more than a little dismayed at their reluctance, which he feared would have "the effect of casting this unfortunate child of my imagination into hopeless oblivion." At last, however, the piece was rescued by the Russian violinist Adolph Brodsky, who in 1881 gave its first performance.

The work follows the conventional concerto form of three movements, arranged in a fast–slow–fast sequence. The outer panels of the composition call for some formidable feats of virtuosity on the part of the soloist. In the first movement, the exceptionally musical cadenza, the traditional passage for the soloist alone, is entirely by the composer, rather than created with a collaborating violinist, as is often the case. Both Kotek and Tchaikovsky's brother Modest were dissatisfied with the original slow movement and persuaded the composer to discard it. Tchaikovsky replaced it with the *Canzonetta* that now occupies the central portion of the composition. He reportedly wrote it in a single day.

WHAT TO LISTEN FOR: The concerto opens with an orchestral statement that we might expect to be the start of the traditional thematic exposition. This proves, however, only a preamble to the entry of the solo instrument, which joins the proceedings with a bit of rhapsodic musing before presenting the first of the movement's principal subjects. A sprightly transitional idea, practically a theme in its own right, leads to the second major subject. Like the first, it is a ravishing tune that testifies to Tchaikovsky's talent as a melodist. The development of these themes during the course of the movement entails passages of blazing virtuosity for the soloist.

The orchestral woodwinds begin the *Canzonetta* with a pensive phrase, which the solo violin takes up and spins into a long melody of pronounced Russian accent. A brighter second theme follows. Its influence on the music's complexion is relatively slight, however, for the initial idea soon returns. Now decorated with echoing phrases from the woodwinds, it re-establishes the movement's prevailing sense of melancholy dreaming. Finally, Tchaikovsky recalls the

introductory music of the woodwinds and extends this to form a transition passage leading directly into the finale.

*Scored for solo violin, 2 flutes, 2 oboes, 2 clarinets, 2 bassoons, 4 horns, 2 trumpets, timpani and strings.*

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