Pittsburgh Symphony Orchestra
2015-2016 Mellon Grand Classics Season

September 18 and 20, 2015

MANFRED HONECK, CONDUCTOR
DANIIL TRIFONOV, PIANO

JOHN STAFFORD SMITH — *The Star-Spangled Banner*

FELIX MENDELSSOHN — Symphony No. 4 in A major, Opus 90, "Italian"

I. Allegro vivace
II. Andante con moto
III. Con moto moderato
IV. Saltarello: Presto

Intermission

DANIIL TRIFONOV — Piano Concerto in E-flat minor

I. Andante — Allegro ma non troppo
II. Andante — Agitato — A tempo —
III. Allegro vivace — Andantino — Presto

Mr. Trifonov

PETER I. TCHAIKOVSKY — *Capriccio Italien*, Opus 45

PROGRAM NOTES BY DR. RICHARD E. RODDA

FELIX MENDELSSOHN

Born 3 February 1809 in Hamburg; died 4 November 1847 in Leipzig

Symphony No. 4 in A major, Opus 90, “Italian” (1831-1833, revised 1834-1837)

PREMIERE OF WORK: London, 13 May 1833; London Philharmonic Orchestra; Felix Mendelssohn, conductor
PSO PREMIERE: 19 March 1896; Carnegie Music Hall; Frederic Archer, conductor
APPROXIMATE DURATION: 27 minutes
INSTRUMENTATION: pairs of woodwinds, horns and trumpets, timpani and strings

Felix Mendelssohn never learned how to take it easy. As a boy, he was awakened at 5:00 every morning to begin a full day of private tutelage, exercise, social instruction and family activities — the busy regimen he learned as a child shaped the rest of his brief life. Inactivity was anathema. Two months of bed rest occasioned by a leg injury in London in 1829 were more painful for the confinement they necessitated than for the medical condition. Throughout his days, Mendelssohn preferred travel to quiet life at home: he trooped across Europe, from Vienna to Wales, from Hamburg to Naples, and was welcomed and admired at every stop. Some of his journeys inspired music — the first of his ten trips to Great Britain, for example, which included a walking tour of Scotland (during which he enjoyed “a half-hour of inconsequential conversation” with Sir Walter Scott), gave rise to the “Scottish” Symphony and the *Hebrides Overture*.

When he was 21, Mendelssohn embarked on an extensive grand tour of the Continent. He met Chopin and Liszt in Paris, painted the breathtaking vistas of Switzerland, and marveled at the artistic riches (and grumbled about the inhospitable treatment by the coachmen and innkeepers) of Italy. “The land where the lemon trees blossom,” as his friend Goethe described sunny Italy, stirred him so deeply that he began a musical work there in 1831 based on his impressions of Rome, Naples and the other cities he visited. The composition of this “Italian” Symphony, as he always called it, caused him much difficulty, however, and he had trouble bringing all of the movements to completion. “For the slow movement I have not yet found anything exactly right, and I think I must put it off for Naples,” he wrote from Rome to his sister Fanny. The spur to finish the work came in the form of a commission for a symphony from the Philharmonic Society of London that caused Mendelssohn to gather up his sketches and complete the task.

The new Symphony was met with immediate acclaim at its premiere on May 13, 1833 in London, one of the series of British successes that helped enshrine Mendelssohn in the English pantheon of 19th-century musical genius as Queen Victoria’s favorite composer. Mendelssohn, however, was not completely satisfied with the original version of the Symphony, and he refused to allow its publication. He tinkered with it again several years later, paying special attention to the finale, but never felt the work to be perfected. It was only after his death that the score was published and became widely available. Despite Mendelssohn’s misgivings, the “Italian” Symphony has become one of the most enduring and popular pieces in the orchestral repertory, declared to be virtually perfect by the demanding British critic and scholar Sir Donald Tovey; it was a special favorite of that cantankerous curmudgeon and one-time music critic, George Bernard Shaw.

Mendelssohn cast his “Italian” Symphony in the traditional four movements. The opening movement takes an exuberant, leaping melody initiated by the violins as its principal subject and a quieter, playful strain led by the clarinets as its subsidiary theme. The intricately contrapuntal development section is largely based on a precise, staccato theme of darker emotional hue but also refers to motives from the main theme. A full recapitulation of the exposition’s materials ensues before the movement ends with a coda that recalls the staccato theme from the development. The *Andante*, in the style of a slow march, may have been inspired by a religious procession that Mendelssohn saw in the streets of Naples, but it also evokes the chorale prelude sung by the Two Armed Men in Mozart’s *The Magic Flute*. The third movement, the gentlest of dances, is in the form of a minuet/scherzo whose central trio utilizes the burnished sonorities of bassoons and horns. The finale turns, surprisingly, to a tempestuous minor key for an exuberant and mercurial dance modeled on the whirling *saltarello* that Mendelssohn heard in Rome.

DANIIL TRIFONOV

Born 5 March 1991 in Nizhny Novgorod, Russia.

Piano Concerto in E-flat minor (2013-2014)

PREMIERE OF WORK: Cleveland, 23 April 2014; Cleveland Institute of Music; Cleveland Institute of Music Orchestra; Joel Smirnoff, conductor; Daniil Trifonov, soloist
THESE PERFORMANCES MARK THE PSO PREMIERE
APPROXIMATE DURATION: 40 minutes
INSTRUMENTATION: piccolo, two flutes, two oboes, two clarinets, bass clarinet, two bassoons, four horns, two trumpets, three trombones, timpani, percussion and strings

Daniil Trifonov, the pianist, has garnered international critical and public acclaim such as few artists ever receive, but his earliest musical experience was as a "composer" — improvising on the household piano before he was five. "That's how my parents actually discovered I had an interest in music," he explained. Trifonov was born in 1991 in Nizhny Novgorod, Russia's fifth-largest city and an important transportation, economic and cultural hub 250 miles east of Moscow that was also the birthplace of the famed writer Maxim Gorky. (The city was known as Gorky from 1932 to 1990.) The Trifonovs were a musical clan: Daniil's grandmother was a choir conductor, his mother was a music theory teacher, and his father composed for a rock band early in life but had taken up classical idioms (with a specialty in music for the Russian Orthodox Church) by the time his son arrived. Piano lessons soon revealed the boy's prodigious talents (he gave his first public performance at age eight) and the family moved to Moscow so he could be enrolled at the Gnessin Academy, one of the country's elite music schools. Daniil not only made spectacular progress during the ensuing years in his piano studies at the Gnessin with Tatiana Zelikman — he won his first competition prize when he was seventeen — but he also immersed himself in the rich traditions of both Russian music and piano virtuosos through recordings and performances while continuing to nurture his interest in composition with works for keyboard and for chamber groups. Soon after making his North American debut in 2009, Trifonov chose to stay in the United States to study piano with Russian-born Sergei Babayan and composition with Keith Fitch at the Cleveland Institute of Music; he received Artist Diplomas from the school in the former discipline in 2013 (three months after his solo debut at Carnegie Hall) and the latter two years later.

Trifonov composed his Piano Concerto in E-flat minor in 2013-2014 on a commission from the Cleveland Institute of Music as part of its initiative to encourage its students, in the words of the school's President, Joel Smirnoff, "to both compose and perform, wedding the mastery of performance and composition with a love and respect for the culture of community." Trifonov's Concerto, his first large-scale orchestral composition, is a remarkable fulfillment of that vision as well as a continuation of the centuries-old tradition of the composer-virtuosos who performed their own works, a lineage that ranges from the troubadours of Medieval France across Bach, Mozart, Beethoven, Chopin and Brahms to Prokofiev, Bartók and Gershwin. Echoes of these last three figure in the work, but it was Sergei Rachmaninoff, the quintessential 20th-century embodiment of the composer-virtuoso, who was the primary influence on Trifonov's Concerto, which is largely modeled on similar pieces by his Russian predecessor in its scale, instrumental resources, harmonic language, seriousness of purpose and no-holds-barred virtuosity. On April 24, 2014, the day after Trifonov premiered the work with the CIM Orchestra conducted by Joel Smirnoff, Zachary Lewis wrote in the Cleveland *Plain Dealer*, "Even having seen it, one cannot quite believe it. Such is the artistry of pianist-composer Daniil Trifonov." As encores that evening, Trifonov played movements from his own *Rachmaniniana Suite* (2010) and Piano Sonata (2013).

The Concerto's first movement, an expansive sonata form, is introduced by a wide-ranging, rising theme (marked "sweet, mysterious" in the score) begun by bass clarinet and continued by oboe. The piano enters with a variant of the introductory motive, which becomes the formal main theme of the exposition when it is taken up with greater urgency by violins and woodwinds. Quiet, lyrical motives played by piano and then bassoons provide a contrast of mood and melody and lead to the development section, which refers briefly to the main and introduction themes before moving on to extended discussions of two new ideas — the first, a broad descending one in dotted rhythms begun by violins; the other, in quick, skittering figurations, initiated by oboe. The recapitulation includes elaborated versions of thematic materials from both introduction and exposition before a brilliant passage of grand pianism brings the movement to a tempestuous finish.

Clarinet and strings provide a soft, gently rocking introduction for the piano's poetic theme in the *Andante*. The central section is agitated first by insistent triplet figurations from clarinets and strings and then by fragmented motives from woodwinds and brass to urge the soloist toward the movement's climax. The mood and music of the opening are restored, but a sudden outburst from the piano prepares for the finale, which follows without pause after a few transitional phrases.

The closing movement is episodic in construction and staggeringly virtuosic in style. Cleveland critic Zachary Lewis wrote, "A pianist would have to be more than usually daring to take on an episode so jam-packed with crazed scampering, hallucinated dances, and brute stomping. Trifonov, of course, made it all seem easy, not to mention wildly exciting." Expressive respite is provided by gentler, contrasting episodes before a flamboyant coda with reminiscences of the introductory motives from the first movement brings the Concerto to a powerful close.

PETER ILYICH TCHAIKOVSKY

Born 7 May 1840 in Votkinsk, Russia; died 6 November 1893 in St. Petersburg

Capriccio Italien, Opus 45 (1880)

PREMIERE OF WORK: Moscow, 18 December 1830; Orchestra of the Russian Musical Society; Nikolai Rubinstein, conductor
PSO PREMIERE: 12 November 1896; Carnegie Music Hall; Frederic Archer, conductor
APPROXIMATE DURATION: 16 minutes
INSTRUMENTATION: piccolo, three flutes, two oboes, English horn, two clarinets, two bassoons, four horns, two trumpets, two cornets, three trombones, tuba, timpani, percussion, harp and strings

For nearly a decade after his disastrous marriage in 1877, Tchaikovsky was filled with self-recrimination and doubts about his ability to compose anything more. He managed to finish the Violin Concerto during the spring of 1878, but then had to wait more than three years for someone to perform it, and did not undertake another large composition until the *Manfred Symphony* of 1885. His frustration was only increased by staying at home in Moscow, so he traveled frequently and far during those years for diversion. In November 1879 he set off for Rome via a circuitous route that took him and his traveling companion, his brother Modeste, through Berlin and Paris, finally arriving in the Eternal City in mid-December. Despite spending the holiday in Rome and taking part in the riotous festivities of Carnival (Tchaikovsky recorded that this "wild folly" did not suit him very well), the sensitive composer still complained in a letter written on February 17, 1880 to his benefactress, Nadezhda von Meck, that "a worm gnaws continually in secret at my heart. I cannot sleep. My God, what an incomprehensible and complicated mechanism the human organism is! We shall never solve the various phenomena of our spiritual and material existence!"

Though Tchaikovsky was never long parted from his residual melancholy, his spirits were temporarily brightened by some of the local tunes he heard in Rome, and he decided to write an orchestral piece that would incorporate several of them. At the beginning of February he wrote to Mme. von Meck, "I have been working, and during the last few days I have sketched the rough draft of an *Italian Caprice* based on popular melodies. I think it has a bright future; it will be effective because of the wonderful melodies I happened to pick up, partly from published collections and partly out of the streets with my own ears." As introduction to the work, Tchaikovsky used a bugle call sounded every evening from the barracks of the Royal Italian Cuirassiers, which was adjacent to the Hotel Costanzi where he was staying. He sketched the *Capriccio* in a week, but then did not return to the score until he was back in Russia in the spring; the orchestration was completed in mid-May at his summer home in Kamenka. The *Capriccio Italien* enjoyed a fine success at its premiere on December 18, 1880 by Nikolai Rubinstein and the Moscow branch of the Russian Musical Society, and audiences demanded its repetition on several subsequent concerts.

Tchaikovsky admitted modeling his *Capriccio Italien* on Mikhail Glinka's potpourri of Spanish themes, *Night in Madrid*, a piece Mili Balakirev had suggested more than a decade earlier that he study for its "masterly fusing-together of sections." The first section of the *Capriccio Italien* opens with the brazen trumpet fanfare of the Royal Cuirassiers, which gives way to a dolorous melody intoned above an insistent accompanimental motive. There follows a swinging tune given first by the oboes in sweet parallel thirds and later by the full orchestra in tintinnabulous splendor. A brisk folk dance comes next, then a reprise of the dolorous melody and finally a whirling *tarantella*, perhaps inspired by the finale of

Mendelssohn's "Italian" Symphony. This "bundle of Italian folk tunes," as Edwin Evans called the *Capriccio Italien*, ends with one of the most rousing displays of orchestral sonority in all of Romantic music.