Pittsburgh Symphony Orchestra
2015-2016 Season

May 22, 2016

MANFRED HONECK, CONDUCTOR
DANIIL TRIFONOV, PIANO

LUDWIG VAN BEETHOVEN — Overture to *Coriolan*, Opus 62

SERGEI RACHMANINOFF — Concerto No. 2 in C minor for Piano and Orchestra, Opus 18

I. Moderato
II. Adagio sostenuto
III. Allegro scherzando
Mr. Trifonov

Intermission

PIOTR ILYICH TCHAIKOVSKY — Symphony No. 6 in B minor, Opus 74, "Pathétique"

I. Adagio — Allegro non troppo
II. Allegro con grazia
III. Allegro molto vivace
IV. Finale: Adagio lamentoso

PROGRAM NOTES BY DR. RICHARD E. RODDA

LUDWIG VAN BEETHOVEN

Born 16 December 1770 in Bonn; died 26 March 1827 in Vienna.

Overture to *Coriolan*, Opus 62 (1807)

PREMIERE OF WORK: Vienna, March 1807; Lobkowitz Palace; Ludwig van Beethoven, conductor
PSO PREMIERE: 7 January 1897; Carnegie Music Hall; Frederic Archer, conductor
APPROXIMATE DURATION: 8 minutes
INSTRUMENTATION: woodwinds, horns and trumpets in pairs, timpani and strings.

This Overture was inspired by, rather than composed for, the tragedy *Coriolan* by Heinrich Joseph von Collin (1771-1811), a jurist, poet and, from 1809, court councilor who enjoyed much theatrical success in Vienna with this play. It opened at the Hofburg Theater on November 11, 1802, with incidental music arranged by Abbé Stadler from Mozart's *Idomeneo*, and held the boards regularly for almost three years, largely because of the lauded portrayal of the title role by Joseph Lange, the brother-in-law of Mozart. Beethoven had been working with Collin to devise a libretto for an opera to follow *Fidelio*, and scenarios based by the poet on *Macbeth*, *Jerusalem Divided* and *Bradamante* had failed to engage the composer's interest. (Beethoven, of course, never found that libretto.) *Coriolan* did take hold in Beethoven's imagination, however — so powerfully that his Overture dates from nearly two years after the play closed.

Though Collin's play was long out of performance by the time Beethoven got around to writing his Overture, there were compelling reasons for his completing the work. This was his fifth overture — preceded by the three *Leonores* and *Prometheus* — and for his concerts he needed a new opening piece, a function this new work would perform nicely. (It is instructive that he provided only an Overture and no other music for *Coriolan*.) Further, Beethoven had still not abandoned hope of securing a regular position as a theatrical composer, and he may have intended this Overture to display his talent to the Viennese impresarios. Indeed, Prince Lobkowitz, one of his staunchest patrons, had recently gained admission to the governing board of the directors of the Royal Imperial Theater, and Lobkowitz even arranged a performance of the play on April 24, 1807 for the express purpose of displaying Beethoven's music in its proper setting. No post came to Beethoven from these machinations, but he did manage to sell the Overture to the English composer-pianist-publisher Muzio Clementi that same week for a tidy sum. (Clementi wrote to his partner in London, "I think I have made a very good bargain," as well he might. Beethoven was the "hottest property," in modern parlance, in European concert circles at that time.)

Beethoven knew the ancient story of Coriolanus not just from Collin's play, but also through the writings of Plutarch and the drama by Shakespeare from which the playwright drew. (There were well-thumbed copies of both the earlier volumes in his library.) The story, which may be either fact or fable, tells of Gaius Marcius, a patrician Roman general of extraordinary bravery who led the Roman armies to a great triumph over the Volscians, the people of the hill country south of Rome. For capturing their city of Corioli, he received the honorary name of Coriolanus. His return to Rome found him embroiled in the conflict between patricians and plebeians, the latter claiming insufferable oppression. The aristocratic Coriolanus so vilified the populace that the senate, yielding to plebeian pressure, voted his permanent exile. So bitter and vengeful did he become that he went to the conquered Volscians, swore allegiance to them, and offered to lead them against Rome. He besieged the city, rejecting all ambassadors until his mother and his wife came to entreat him to abandon his wrathful revenge. They subdued his bitter arrogance and pride, and he withdrew the Volscians, who turned against him. In Shakespeare's version, he is slain by them; in Collin's adaptation, he commits suicide.

The Overture opens (C minor) with stern unison notes in the strings punctuated by slashing chords from the full orchestra. A restless, foreboding figure of unsettled rhythmic character constitutes the main theme. The second theme is a lyrical melody, greatly contrasting with the preceding measures, but not immune from their agitated expectancy. The tempestuous development derives its mood and material from the main theme. The recapitulation recalls the opening gestures, but in F minor rather than C minor. The C tonality returns with the second theme. A lengthy coda, almost a second development, pits the

lyrical melody against the imperious statement. The final outburst of the unison gesture spread, at last, across the full orchestra represents the dramatic denouement and the extinction of Coriolan's awful pride. The Overture dies away amid sighs and silence.

SERGEI RACHMANINOFF

Born 1 April 1873 in Oneg (near Novgorod), Russia; died 28 March 1943 in Beverly Hills, California.

Concerto No. 2 in C minor for Piano and Orchestra, Opus 18 (1900-1901)

PREMIERE OF WORK: Moscow, October 9, 1901; Moscow Philharmonic Society Orchestra; Alexander Siloti, conductor; Sergei Rachmaninoff, soloist
PSO PREMIERE: 18 March 1934; Syria Mosque; Antonio Modarelli, conductor; Walter Gieseking, soloist
APPROXIMATE DURATION: 32 minutes
INSTRUMENTATION: woodwinds in pairs, four horns, two trumpets, three trombones, tuba, timpani, percussion and strings

When he was old and as mellow as he would ever get, Rachmaninoff wrote these words about his early years: "Although I had to fight for recognition, as most younger men must, although I have experienced all the troubles and sorrow which precede success, and although I know how important it is for an artist to be spared such troubles, I realize, when I look back on my early life, that it was enjoyable, in spite of all its vexations and bitterness." The greatest "bitterness" of Rachmaninoff's career was the total failure of the Symphony No. 1 at its premiere in 1897, a traumatic disappointment that thrust him into such a mental depression that he suffered a complete nervous collapse.

An aunt of Rachmaninoff, Varvara Satina, had recently been successfully treated for an emotional disturbance by a certain Dr. Nicholas Dahl, a Moscow physician who was familiar with the latest psychiatric discoveries in France and Vienna, and it was arranged that Rachmaninoff should visit him. Years later, in his memoirs, the composer recalled the malady and the treatment: "[Following the performance of the First Symphony,] something within me snapped. A paralyzing apathy possessed me. I did nothing at all and found no pleasure in anything. Half my days were spent on a couch sighing over my ruined life. My only occupation consisted in giving a few piano lessons to keep myself alive." For more than a year, Rachmaninoff's condition persisted. He began his daily visits to Dr. Dahl in January 1900. "My relatives had informed Dr. Dahl that he must by all means cure me of my apathetic condition and bring about such results that I would again be able to compose. Dahl had inquired what kind of composition was desired of me, and he was informed 'a concerto for pianoforte.' In consequence, I heard repeated, day after day, the same hypnotic formula, as I lay half somnolent in an armchair in Dr. Dahl's consulting room: 'You will start to compose a concerto — You will work with the greatest of ease — The composition will be of excellent quality.' Always it was the same, without interruption.... Although it may seem impossible to believe," Rachmaninoff continued, "this treatment really helped me. I started to compose again at the beginning of the summer." In gratitude, he dedicated the new Concerto to Dr. Dahl.

The C minor Concerto begins with eight bell-tone chords from the solo piano that herald the surging main theme, announced by the strings. A climax is achieved before a sudden drop in intensity makes way for the arching second theme, initiated by the soloist. The development, concerned largely with the first theme, is propelled by a martial rhythm that continues with undiminished energy into the recapitulation. The second theme returns in the horn before the martial mood is re-established to close the movement. The *Adagio* is a long-limbed nocturne with a running commentary of sweeping figurations from the piano. The finale resumes the marching rhythmic motion of the first movement with its introduction and bold main theme. Standing in bold relief to this vigorous music is the lyrical second theme, one of the best-loved melodies in the entire orchestral literature, a grand inspiration in the ripest Romantic tradition. These two themes, the martial and the romantic, alternate for the remainder of the movement. The coda rises through a finely crafted line of mounting tension to bring this work to an electrifying close.

PIOTR ILYICH TCHAIKOVSKY

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

Symphony No. 6 in B minor, Opus 74, “Pathétique” (1893)

PREMIERE OF WORK: St. Petersburg, October 28, 1893; Hall of Nobility; Orchestra of the Imperial Russian Music Society; Piotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky, conductor
PSO PREMIERE: 17 November 1899; Carnegie Music Hall; Victor Herbert, conductor
APPROXIMATE DURATION: 49 minutes
INSTRUMENTATION: piccolo, three flutes, two oboes, two clarinets, two bassoons, four horns, two trumpets, three trombones, tuba, timpani, percussion and strings.

Tchaikovsky died in 1893, at the age of only 53. His death was long attributed to the accidental drinking of a glass of unboiled water during a cholera outbreak, but that theory has been questioned in recent years with the alternate explanation that he was forced to take his own life because of a homosexual liaison with the underage son of a noble family. Though the manner of Tchaikovsky’s death is incidental to the place of his Sixth Symphony in music history, the fact of it is not.

Tchaikovsky conducted his B minor Symphony for the first time only a week before his death. It was given a cool reception by musicians and public, and his frustration was multiplied when discussion of the work was avoided by the guests at a dinner party following the concert. Three days later, however, his mood seemed brighter and he told a friend that he was not yet ready to be snatched off by death, “that snubbed-nose horror. I feel that I shall live a long time.” He was wrong. The evidence of the manner of his death is not conclusive, but what is certain is the overwhelming grief and sense of loss felt by music lovers in Russia and abroad as the news of his passing spread. Memorial concerts were planned. One of the first was in St. Petersburg on November 18th, only twelve days after he died. Eduard Napravnik conducted the Sixth Symphony on that occasion, and it was a resounding success. The “Pathétique” was wafted by the winds of sorrow across the musical world, and became — and remains — one of the most popular symphonies ever written, the quintessential expression of tragedy in music.

The music of the “Pathétique” is a distillation of the strong residual strain of melancholy in Tchaikovsky’s personality rather than a mirror of his daily feelings and thoughts. Though he admitted there was a program for the Symphony, he refused to reveal it. “Let him guess it who can,” he told Vladimir Davidov. A cryptic note discovered years later among his sketches suggests that the first movement was “all impulsive passion; the second, love; the third, disappointments; the fourth, death — the result of collapse.” It is not clear, however, whether this précis applied to the finished version of the work, or was merely a preliminary, perhaps never even realized, plan. That Tchaikovsky at one point considered the title “Tragic” for the score gives sufficient indication of its prevailing emotional content.

The title “Pathétique” was suggested to Tchaikovsky by his elder brother, Modeste. In his biography of Piotr, Modeste recalled that they were sitting around a tea table one evening after the premiere, and the composer was unable to settle on an appropriate designation for the work before sending it to the publisher. The sobriquet “Pathétique” popped into Modeste’s mind and Tchaikovsky pounced on it immediately: “Splendid, Modi, bravo. ‘Pathétique’ it shall be.” This title has always been applied to the Symphony, though the original Russian word carries a meaning closer to “passionate” or “emotional” than to the English “pathetic.”

The Symphony opens with a slow introduction dominated by the sepulchral intonation of the bassoon, whose melody, in a faster tempo, becomes the impetuous first theme of the exposition. Additional instruments are drawn into the symphonic argument until the brasses arrive to crown the movement’s first climax. The tension subsides into silence before the yearning second theme appears, “like a recollection of happiness in time of pain,” according to American musicologist Edward Downes. The tempestuous development section, intricate, brilliant and the most masterful thematic manipulation in Tchaikovsky’s output, is launched by a mighty blast from the full orchestra. The recapitulation is more condensed, vibrantly scored and intense in emotion than the exposition. The major tonality achieved with the second theme is maintained until the hymnal end of the movement.

Tchaikovsky referred to the second movement as a scherzo, though its 5/4 meter gives it more the feeling of a waltz with a limp. This music’s rhythmic novelty must have been remarkable in 1893, and the distinguished Viennese critic Eduard Hanslick even suggested that it should be changed to 6/8 to avoid annoyance to performers and listeners. Charles O’Connell, however, saw the irregular meter as essential to the movement’s effect, “as if its gaiety were constantly under constraint; directed, not by careless joy, but by a determination to be joyful.”

The third movement is a boisterous march whose brilliant surface may conceal a deeper meaning. Tchaikovsky’s biographer John Warrack wrote, “On the face of it, this is a sprightly march; yet it is

barren, constructed out of bleak intervals, and for all the merriness of its manner, essentially empty, with a coldness at its heart."

The tragedy of the finale is apparent immediately at the outset in its somber contrast to the whirling explosion of sound that ends the third movement. A profound emptiness pervades the finale, which maintains its slow tempo and mood of despair throughout. Banished completely are the joy and affirmation of the traditional symphonic finale, here replaced by a new emotional and structural concept that opened important expressive possibilities for 20th-century composers. Olin Downes dubbed this movement "a dirge," and, just as there is no certainty about what happens to the soul when the funeral procession ends, so Tchaikovsky here leaves the question of existence forever hanging, unanswered, embodied in the mysterious, dying close of the Symphony.