

Pittsburgh Symphony Orchestra  
2016-2017 Mellon Grand Classics Season

June 9 and 10, 2017

VASILY PETRENKO, CONDUCTOR  
BEHZOD ABDURAIMOV, PIANO

PIOTR ILYICH  
TCHAIKOVSKY

CONCERTO NO. 1 FOR PIANO AND ORCHESTRA  
IN B-FLAT MINOR, OPUS 23

- I. Allegro non troppo e molto maestoso — Allegro con spirito
- II. Andantino semplice — Prestissimo
- III. Allegro con fuoco

**Mr. Abduraimov**

INTERMISSION

DMITRI SHOSTAKOVICH SYMPHONY NO. 8 IN C MAJOR, OPUS 65

- I. Adagio — Allegro non troppo
- II. Allegretto
- III. Allegro non troppo —
- IV. Largo —
- V. Allegretto

David Radzynski, Guest Concertmaster (Concertmaster , Israel Philharmonic Orchestra)

## PROGRAM NOTES BY DR. RICHARD E. RODDA

### PETER ILYICH TCHAIKOVSKY

#### Concerto No. 1 for Piano and Orchestra in B-flat minor, Opus 23 (1874-1875)

Peter Ilyich Tchaikovsky was born in Votkinsk, Russia on May 7, 1840, and died in St. Petersburg on November 6, 1893. He composed his First Piano Concerto between 1874 and 1875, and it premiered in Boston on October 25, 1875, with the Boston Symphony Orchestra led by Benjamin Johnson Lang and Hans von Bülow as soloist. The premiere was such a success that Bülow performed the concerto on 139 concerts during his 1875-76 concert season. The Pittsburgh Symphony did not perform the concerto until December 8, 1898, with Victor Herbert and soloist Adele aus der Ohe. The score calls for woodwinds pairs, four horns, two trumpets, three trombones, timpani and strings.

#### **Performance time: approximately 34 minutes**

At the end of 1874, Tchaikovsky began a piano concerto with the hope of having a success great enough to allow him to leave his irksome teaching post at the Moscow Conservatory. By late December, he had largely sketched the work, and he sought the advice of Nikolai Rubinstein, Director of the Moscow Conservatory and an excellent pianist. Tchaikovsky reported on the interview:

"On Christmas Eve 1874, Nikolai asked me to play the Concerto in a classroom of the Conservatory. We agreed to it. I played through the work. There burst forth from Rubinstein's mouth a mighty torrent of words. It appeared that my Concerto was utterly worthless, absolutely unplayable; the piece as a whole was bad, trivial, vulgar." Tchaikovsky was furious, and he stormed out of the classroom. He made only one change in the score: he obliterated the name of the original dedicatee — Nikolai Rubinstein — and substituted that of the virtuoso pianist Hans von Bülow, who was performing Tchaikovsky's piano pieces across Europe. Bülow gladly accepted the dedication and asked to program the premiere on his upcoming American tour. The Concerto created such a sensation when it was first heard, in Boston on October 25, 1875, that Bülow played it on 139 of his 172 concerts that season. (Remarkably, Tchaikovsky's Second Piano Concerto was also premiered in this country, on November 12, 1881 by the New York Philharmonic Society conducted by Theodore Thomas with Madeleine Schiller as soloist.)

Tchaikovsky's First Piano Concerto opens with the familiar theme of the introduction, a sweeping melody nobly sung by violins and cellos above thunderous chords from the piano. Following a decrescendo and a pause, the piano presents the snapping main theme. (Tchaikovsky said that this curious melody was inspired by a tune he heard sung by a blind beggar at a street fair.) The clarinet announces the lyrical, bittersweet second theme. The simplicity of the second movement's three-part structure (A–B–A) is augured by the purity of its opening — a languid melody in the solo flute. The center of the movement is of very different character, with a quick tempo and a swift, balletic melody. The languid theme and moonlit mood of the first section return to round out the movement. The crisp rhythmic motive presented immediately at the beginning of the finale and then spun into a complete theme by the soloist dominates much of the movement. In the theme's vigorous full-orchestra guise, it has much of the spirit of a robust Cossack dance. To balance the vigor of this music, Tchaikovsky introduced a romantic melody first entrusted to the violins. The dancing Cossacks repeatedly advance upon this bit of tenderness, which shows a hardy determination. The two themes contend, but the flying Cossacks have the last word.

### DMITRI SHOSTAKOVICH

#### Symphony No. 8, Opus 65 (1943)

Dmitri Shostakovich was born in St. Petersburg on September 25, 1906, and died in Moscow on August 9, 1975. He composed his Eighth Symphony in 1943, and it was premiered at the Moscow Conservatory by the USSR Symphony Orchestra and Evgeni Mravinsky on November 4, 1943. The Pittsburgh Symphony premiered the work on October 18, 1985, with conductor Rudolf Barshai, and most recently performed it with music director Mariss Jansons on February 11, 2011. The score calls for two piccolos,

four flutes, two oboes, English horn, E-flat clarinet, two clarinets, bass clarinet, two bassoons, contrabassoon, four horns, three trumpets, three trombones, tuba, timpani, percussion and strings.

**Performance time: approximately 62 minutes**

Hitler's siege of Leningrad was one of the most barbarous episodes in the history of warfare. Boris Schwarz, in *Music and Musical Life in Soviet Russia, 1917-1970*, described the horror: "This city of three million people was cut off, encircled, and condemned to death by starvation. The blockade lasted from September 1941 to February 1943; but even after the blockade was broken, the Germans were entrenched only two miles from the Kirov works. During the eighteen months of the blockade, 632,000 people died of hunger and privation, according to official figures. Unofficially, the estimate is closer to one million deaths, or one-third of the population.... In addition to hunger and cold, the city was subjected to shelling and air raids. The winter of 1941-1942, when the official food rations — if they could be obtained — were reduced to under 500 calories a day for many adults, was particularly cruel. People died everywhere, on the street, at work, in offices and factories. Water pipes burst and people had to drink the infested water of the Neva or of the canals. Electric power was cut to a minimum, and there were no lights in houses and offices."

Dmitri Shostakovich, a native of Leningrad and a member of the city's conservatory faculty, was refused admission to the armed forces because of his always-frail health, but he was allowed to serve in a local fire brigade during the ferocious shelling in August 1941 which softened up the city for the siege. In October, Shostakovich, his wife, Nina, and their two children were removed first to Moscow and then to the safer confines of Kuibyshev, temporary seat of the government, where the searing experience in Leningrad drew from him the monumental Symphony No. 7, which evoked not just the brutality of what he had seen but also a hopeful vision of Soviet victory and ultimate peace. The "Leningrad" Symphony, completed in Kuibyshev in December 1941 and premiered there the following March, became a world-wide symbol of Soviet heroism and resistance to German aggression through hundreds of performances and broadcasts in the Allied countries. The work provided a badly needed ray of hope at a time of great despair, and it was expected by the Soviet government and the Russian people that Shostakovich would make further such contributions to the war effort. During 1942, however, he wrote little overtly patriotic music, just some numbers for a song and dance production in Kuibyshev titled *Native Country*, a *Solemn March* for military band, and some utilitarian violin-and-piano arrangements of Russian songs for war-time performance, though these pieces — and the lightning success of the "Leningrad" Symphony — proved sufficient for him to be named an Honored Artist of the Russian Soviet Federated Socialist Republic in October. Rather than writing musical propaganda, Shostakovich devoted the year largely to overseeing performances of the Symphony No. 7 in Moscow and Leningrad, and to composing the *Six Romances on Verses by English Poets* and an opera, eventually abandoned, on Gogol's satirical play *The Gamblers*. Despite the relative safety of Kuibyshev, he was growing bored with life in the provinces, and he eagerly accepted an invitation to teach at the Moscow Conservatory when it was offered to him in December 1942. Before he could leave Kuibyshev, however, he ended up in the hospital with a severe gastric infection; he occupied himself during his convalescence by writing his Second Piano Sonata. He had recovered sufficiently by April to move to Moscow with Nina (the children stayed in Kuibyshev with the composer's mother), and by the summer, he was able to begin the long-awaited successor to the "Leningrad" Symphony. He was installed at the rural retreat in Ivanovo that had been granted to the Union of Composers for its members' creative work, and there, between July 2 and September 9, 1943, he composed his Symphony No. 8.

By the time of the premiere of Shostakovich's Eighth Symphony — November 4, 1943 in Moscow, conducted by Evgeni Mravinsky — the tide of war had shifted in favor of the Soviets. The country's army had withstood the terrible battle of Stalingrad the previous year (the new Symphony was referred to as the "Stalingrad" for a time), dealt the Germans a massive defeat at Kursk, and recaptured Kiev and Smolensk, and it was expected that Shostakovich would celebrate these victories in his new Symphony. Those expectations were not met. Rather than a glorious paean to the advance of the Soviet forces, Shostakovich had created a tragic, brooding, epic work that offered little solace for the devastating toll that the war had exacted on the country. Official reaction to the new Symphony was icy: reviews ranged from disappointed to openly hostile; *Izvestia* and *Pravda*, the leading Soviet publications, printed nothing at all on the premiere; even Prokofiev criticized the work for its undue length and its "lack of a clear melodic line." In *Testimony*, Shostakovich's purported memoirs, the editor, Solomon Volkov, quoted the composer as saying, "When the Eighth was performed, it was openly declared counter-revolutionary and anti-Soviet. They said, Why did Shostakovich write an optimistic symphony at the beginning of the war and a tragic one now? At the beginning of the war, we were retreating and now we're attacking,

destroying the Fascists. The dissatisfaction gathered and rose.” The Symphony generated heated (almost entirely derogatory) discussion throughout the country’s musical establishment. It was given again, in Novosibirsk in February 1944 and in liberated Leningrad the following December, but then labeled as “not recommended for performance” by the government *apparatchiks*, and effectively banned. Performances in Britain and the United States in 1944 created little stir. Though the Symphony essentially disappeared from performance after 1944, its portrayal of brutality and suffering remained vividly in the memory of the Soviet regime, and the work was singled out as one of Shostakovich’s most glaring transgressions at his censure in 1948. It was only in 1960, when Shostakovich finally became a member of the Communist Party that the Symphony No. 8 was again allowed to be heard. Though it has never gained the popularity of several of his other symphonies, the Eighth has come to be regarded as one of Shostakovich’s most monumental and deeply moving creations, a profound cry against the inhumanity of war.

In their biography of the composer, Dmitri and Ludmilla Sollertinsky wrote, “The Eighth Symphony represents the height of tragedy in Shostakovich’s output. The realism is relentless, the emotion is stretched to the limit, and there is tension in the expressive means employed. It is an unusual work: the normal proportions of light and shade, tragedy and optimism are disregarded here, while gloomy tones predominate. Among the Symphony’s five movements, not one brings relief; each is deeply tragic. In spite of its enormous size, the Symphony’s development is constant and purposeful.” The opening movement, a vast *Adagio* in sonata form, includes two contrasting ideas within its main theme group. The first, presented by low and high strings in imitative dialogue, is a powerful motive driven by sharp, stabbing rhythms; the other is a long, smooth, mournful melody given by the violins. The woodwinds carry the stabbing motive to a climax, which quickly subsides for the presentation of the formal second theme, a sorrowful, wide-interval violin strain in 5/4 meter played above an anxious, stuttering background. The development section generates enormous tension through the brutalizing treatment of the two main theme motives. The music roars toward an overwhelming climax that is abruptly cut off by ominous percussion rolls to mark the beginning of the recapitulation. The main theme material reappears only in hammering fragments before the English horn plays a melancholy recitative that evolves into the return of the second subject. The recall of the stabbing motive in close imitation and a weary remembrance of the smooth, mournful melody provide the movement’s coda. The esteemed conductor and tireless champion of 20th-century music Sergei Koussevitzky said, “This movement, by the power of its human emotion, surpasses everything else created in our time.”

The second and third movements embody different demonic aspects of war: the grotesque military march and the relentlessly pounding machine. The ferocious *Allegretto* could well be a parody of goose-stepping German storm troopers, while the *Allegro non troppo*, built from little more than an incessant mechanical rhythm and shrieking woodwind chords, evokes some remorseless engine of battle. The juggernaut pauses for a series of fearsome trumpet calls in the middle of the third movement, but the mechanistic music returns, and is whipped to an enormous climax out of which emerges a shattering drum roll as the bridge to the fourth movement. This *Largo* is a stark, funereal passacaglia, an ancient form comprising a series of variations upon a repeating melody that Shostakovich also used to lend solemnity and tragic grandeur to his Violin Concerto No. 1, E minor Piano Trio and String Quartets Nos. 6 and 10.

The finale, which follows without pause, takes as its principal material a gliding, rather innocuous theme offered by the solo bassoon. Additional material is provided by a wide-ranging cello melody and a boisterous, rolling theme in the low winds. These ideas, especially the bassoon melody, are given an energetic working-out until they are interrupted by a threatening recall of the sinister stabbing motive that opened the Symphony. The finale’s themes seem overwhelmed by this outburst, as though the tentative optimism mustered in the first part of the movement had been crushed by the stunning realization of war’s brutality, and they reappear meekly in the coda. The ending, made from the smashed atoms of the bassoon’s theme, is slow and quiet and hesitant. Heroism and victory are forgotten after war’s blast, Shostakovich seems to say. Compassion and exhaustion remain.