CONCERT NOTES

Tchaikovsky Symphony No. 6, “Pathétique” from
Berlin Philharmonie, May 22, 2016
I am so pleased to be together with you for the launch of our “Extraordinary Measures” web broadcast series. A special thank you to BNY Mellon, the sponsor of our BNY Mellon Grand Classics series for supporting these Friday night broadcasts.

In these extraordinary times, I want you to know that I am together with you in spirit. And while it is an unusual situation that we as artists are not able to be together with you in the concert hall, we still can communicate with you and stay connected. It’s also a chance for you to enjoy our amazing musicians from your own personal concert hall!

I am happy to have this occasion to share with you an outstanding and memorable performance from our Spring 2016 European tour, Tchaikovsky’s Symphony No. 6, called the “Pathétique,” as well as a few of my own thoughts about the symphony. This concert was performed and recorded live at the Berlin Philharmonie in May 2016.

We very much hope to soon be able to play live for you. And until we meet again in person, we hope that our music will help you to stay inspired, elevated and connected.
When Mozart died in 1791 while working on his Requiem, many theories arose. Perhaps Mozart had written his own Requiem? Or had been poisoned? Similar speculation took place when Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky died only nine days after the world premiere of his Sixth Symphony. Even to this day, rumors abound that he had been judged by a secret St. Petersburg law court, was poisoned by arsenic or had written his last symphony knowing he would soon die.

Many people often wonder, “Is this Symphony about Tchaikovsky’s death?”

Despite all speculation, one thing is clear: there is not a direct connection between the composition of the Sixth Symphony and his death.

On February 11, 1893, in a letter to his beloved nephew, to whom the Sixth Symphony would later be dedicated, Tchaikovsky wrote, “You know I destroyed a symphony I had been composing and only partly orchestrated in autumn. During my journey I had the idea for another symphony, this time with a programme, but such a programme that will remain an enigma to everyone — let them guess; the symphony shall be entitled: A Programme Symphony. The program itself will be suffused with subjectivity. The form of this symphony will have much that is new, and amongst other things, the finale will not be a noisy allegro, but on the contrary, a long drawn-out adagio.”

Here, one must wonder what Tchaikovsky refers to when speaking about a secret program?

It is important to remember that during this time period when the Symphony was composed (the year 1893), it was not necessarily unusual to have a program. It was around this very same time, in fact, that Strauss composed Till Eulenspiegel and one year later, Death and Transfiguration, both of which are inspired by colorful narratives. Additionally, Mahler, (who incidentally considered Tchaikovsky’s Sixth Symphony to be his most beloved piece), worked on his epic Second Symphony between 1888-1894, also clearly informed by a program.

Without a doubt though, it is clear that the program of the Sixth Symphony is related to Tchaikovsky’s personal life, famously rich in disappointments, desperation and unusual events. These include: his struggle with his own sexuality, his mysterious marriage to Antonina Miliukova which lasted for only a few weeks, his following attempt at suicide, as well as his own rather peculiar relationship to his pen pal and patroness, Nadezhda von Meck.

Through it all, Tchaikovsky’s great refuge was music. As Tchaikovsky himself said, “I placed in this symphony—without exaggerating—my entire soul”—and this was a soul filled with passion, yearning, fervor and a tremendous depth of feeling.

One may wonder, what are the challenges in this Symphony?

When interpreting Tchaikovsky, I am aware of three potential issues: 1) exaggeration, 2) excessiveness and 3) impatience.

Starting with the first, exaggeration, it is important to note that Tchaikovsky’s music in itself is deeply emotional. Therefore, it is not only unnecessary, but actually dangerous to boost that which is already there. My predecessor at the Pittsburgh Symphony Orchestra, the late Maestro Mariss Jansons, for whom I hold the greatest esteem, once said, “It is not necessary to add sugar to honey”-- and I, likewise, believe this to be very true.

Regarding the second challenge, excessive and sustained dynamic levels without moderation, within the numerous risings and eruptions that are directly indicated by Tchaikovsky, one must be careful not to always play the written fff. Otherwise, this might lead to constant noise, as Tchaikovsky himself spoke about with the “noisy Allegro.”

Finally, regarding impatience, it is important that the dynamics are scaled in a sequence that serves the music. One can often find long risings that reach the end-dynamic much too soon, thus losing the desired overall musical effect.

The next question to explore is what is new and unusual in this Symphony?

When examining the Sixth Symphony, it is interesting to note the rather unusual sequence of movements that Tchaikovsky chose: the first movement is long, slow in the beginning, and fast in the middle; the second and the third movements are both Scherzo-like, and the third could easily be seen as a triumphant finale. The fourth movement, an Adagio, then comes as a weighty surprise. It is a farewell and an epilogue.
First Movement  Adagio – Allegro non troppo
It is fascinating that Tchaikovsky does not have the violins play at the opening of this great Symphony. And interestingly, the same is the case in Tchaikovsky’s Fifth Symphony. Both here and there, Tchaikovsky sets a gloomy undertone. The mood is similar to that of a Requiem, therefore it is not surprising that he creates a dark color in the low strings before the motives of sorrow and sighs are introduced by the solo bassoon played by Nancy Goeres and the violas, later repeated throughout the whole symphony.

One of my favorite moments in this movement is the second theme. I call it the love theme. Listen how expressively our musicians play this most beautiful music. And you will see our former concertmaster, Noah Bendix-Balgley, on the front stand. It is a true art to play extremely quietly. At one point, Tchaikovsky asks for 6 piannissimi, originally in the contrabassoon, but soon it was changed to the bass clarinet. Why? Well, the bass clarinet can really produce an almost inaudible sound. Listen to the same love theme, now played by Michael Rusinek on the clarinet and follow how Tchaikovsky lets the music fade to nothing before interrupting the mood with a shocking, loud chord.

It is also an equal challenge to attain real intensity. At times, Tchaikovsky demands an extraordinary mass of sound in order to sustain the intensity throughout the wave. Listen to one of the most dramatic moments of the first movement, this passage one of tremendous desperation, which leads directly into the peak of catastrophe. At this moment, it can hardly be realized with enough intense desperation. Tchaikovsky writes 3 times f which means fortississimo, and the fortississimo marks the high point of the ascending line, but the final goal is really some bars later where he adds a fourth f. Tchaikovsky goes here to the ultimate extreme. And one of many things I love with the PSO is the supreme fire and energy that they bring to the music. Listen to the amazing power and depth of feeling that our musicians exude in this dramatic music.

Second Movement- Allegro con grazia
Even though the second movement is written in the 5/4 meter, one can perceive it almost as a waltz. Similar to Tchaikovsky’s ballets, the highest degree of elegance is required here. But there is something special in the trio which echoes a somehow darker Requiem mood----- even the world of dance is not safe. Here we find a beautiful simple melody, but underneath the timpani, bassoon and basses impose a knocking quarter note rhythm. I have asked the orchestra to play it while thinking of a heartbeat.

Third Movement- Allegro molto vivace
Next is the third movement, another miracle of composition, revealing the pure genius of Tchaikovsky. Here, Tchaikovsky masterfully creates the impression of a Scherzo from the opening bars, finally revealing the main march theme no less than seventy bars later. It is a virtual Shakespearean world: everything is in motion and the spirits move. Sometimes, shreds of motives can be heard and the eighth notes march continuously. Interestingly, there is no single moment within the first seventy six bars where there is not the motion of eighth notes. Ease, fluency and liveness are essential.

What an amazing energy that this movement exudes! Very often, by the end, the audience can’t hold back their applause! We conductors try to avoid applause here, but it is nearly impossible to stop them! You will soon see for yourself how the Berlin audience reacted.

Fourth Movement- Finale: Adagio lamentoso- Andante
The final movement came as a total surprise to the world of music. The audience expected a furious finale or as Tchaikovsky, himself, put it, “a noisy allegro.” But instead, Tchaikovsky delivers a lengthy adagio, full of passion and emotion. It is marked Adagio lamentoso (a chant of mourning), and the movement describes the end of a life, meaning death. Most of the phrasing moves downwards and throughout, there is deep sorrow and desperation. The beautiful and touching Andante that follows has a descending line as well, but expresses hopeful melancholy. There is still life, but it is almost as if the dying soul looks back one final time.

Throughout, one can truly be amazed by the dramatic ways that Tchaikovsky captures the last moments of a dying human. He writes into the music the anatomy of a death agony. It is for this reason that Tchaikovsky marks the horns to be played
“stopped,” meaning with the hand in the bell, bringing out an almost unnatural sound. Here, I ask our horn players to depict the extreme desperation experienced when facing the most hurtful pain imaginable, sounding ultimately almost like a distorted human voice.

The tam-tam, traditionally symbolizing death, is heard remarkably only once throughout the entire Symphony, exactly at the moment when the human dies. Its sound is mystical and once struck, resonates for a long time before slowly fading away. At this special moment, before the chorale begins, I allow a bit of time to let it ring. The chorale of sorrow, orchestrated naturally in the trombones, then descends.

The last coda is a mourning lamentoso. The pizzicatti of the basses at the end are symbolic of fading heartbeats and it seems here that not only does the music grow softer and softer as it comes to a close, but that a physical life has come to end now, as well. The Symphony that started with the lowest instruments now also ends with them.

Throughout this great work, it is undoubtedly clear that Tchaikovsky truly put all of his soul into this unique masterpiece. I dare to say that in a way, Tchaikovsky experienced his own death through the music. One can be sure that only somebody who is deeply empathetic about both life and death is capable of creating such an atmosphere, and I am so very grateful to the great musicians of the Pittsburgh Symphony Orchestra who went with me on this journey, requiring the utmost technical perfection to reach such a level of expression.

I invite you to enjoy our performance of Tchaikovsky’s Symphony No. 6, “Pathétique,” recorded live in May 2016, at the Berlin Philharmonie.

–MANFRED HONECK