

# MANFRED HONECK'S NOTES ON TCHAIKOVSKY'S CONCERTO NO. 1 FOR PIANO AND ORCHESTRA



As part of our Summer with the Symphony programming, we have put together a special two-week pairing of "Piano Masters" featuring two of the most dynamic and outstanding artists performing today: Yuja Wang and Daniil Trifonov. We begin this week with Yuja Wang and a dazzling performance of the Tchaikovsky First Piano Concerto from our 2013 tour performance in Bucharest, Romania. This occasion marked the first time that the Pittsburgh Symphony Orchestra and I performed as part of the celebrated George Enescu Festival.

You could say that the Tchaikovsky Piano Concerto does not need much introduction—it is no doubt among the most popular works in the entire classical music repertoire, and a favorite of pianists and audiences around the world. But, then you would miss the remarkable backstory of its origins.

In November 1874, Tchaikovsky wrote to his brother, Anatoly, about his immersion in the writing of a new piano concerto. He had in mind to perform it the famous Nikolai Rubinstein, pianist and head of the new Moscow Conservatory. Though Tchaikovsky alluded to difficulties in writing the piece, he completed the Concerto and played it through for Rubinstein and some friends on Christmas Eve.

"I played the first movement," Tchaikovsky recalled. "Not a word, not an observation! [...]" Just silence. But after Tchaikovsky finished, Rubinstein declared the concerto as "worthless [...] impossible to play, that its passages were clumsy, awkward, so awkward that they could not be corrected, that as a composition it was bad, that I stole from here and there, that there are only two or three pages worth preserving [...]" Tchaikovsky was deeply insulted. And yet, despite the harsh criticism, he remained undaunted and refused to change a single note.

The one change that Tchaikovsky did make, though, was the name of the dedicatee in the score. He crossed out Nikolai Rubinstein, and instead substituted the German pianist and conductor Hans von Bülow. Bülow was immediately taken with the work. He declared that it "displays such brilliance and is such a remarkable achievement [...] that you have without a doubt enriched the world of music as never before." He went on to cite the originality, nobility, strength, unique conception and maturity of form, style, design and execution. "In a word, this true gem shall earn you the gratitude of all pianists."



Yuja Wang was named Musical America's Artist of the Year in 2017.

And truer words were never spoken. Bülow asked to program the premiere on his upcoming American tour and gave the world premiere in 1875 in Boston. It was a sensation. The Concerto was applauded wildly by the American audience and was an immediate success, so much so that Bülow played it on 139 of his 172 concerts that season. It has since become a main staple of the repertoire, even making its way into pop culture, heard on *The Simpsons, Mad Men*, and in numerous films.

We're so pleased to showcase the remarkable talents of Yuja Wang as soloist in this performance of the Tchaikovsky First Piano Concerto. Her phenomenal technique, sheer power, captivating musicianship and charismatic stage presence make her the perfect artist to bring this tour-de-force Concerto to life together with the Pittsburgh Symphony Orchestra.

FRIDAY NIGHT CONCERTS
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# **PROGRAM**

#### **FRIDAY NIGHT CONCERTS**

JULY 10, 2020 AT 8:00 P.M.

RECORDED LIVE AT SALA PALATULUI CONCERT HALL, BUCHAREST, ROMANIA. GEORGE ENESCU FESTIVAL SEPTEMBER 3, 2013

Manfred Honeck, conductor Yuja Wang, piano

Piotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky

Concerto No. 1 in B-flat minor for Piano and Orchestra, Opus 23

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

Ms. Wang





Manfred Honeck, conductor, and Yuja Wang, piano, at the PSO's concert in Bucharest, September 2013. "Tchaikovsky is the first music I heard, my mom brought me to a rehearsal of 'Swan Lake.' There is no other music that speaks more directly to the heart," Ms. Wang told Reuters in an interview following a rehearsal on the day of this performance.

# **ABOUT THE MUSIC**



PETER ILYICH TCHAIKOVSKY

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.

## YUJA WANG

Critical superlatives and audience ovations have continuously followed Yuja Wang's dazzling career. The Beijing-born pianist, celebrated for her charismatic artistry and captivating stage presence, is set to achieve new heights during the 2019/20 season, which features recitals, concert series, as well as season residencies, and extensive tours with some of the world's most venerated ensembles and conductors.

Season highlights include Yuja's year-long "Artist Spotlight" at the Barbican Centre, where she curates and performs in four distinct events: the first London performance of John Adams' newest piano concerto (premiered by her in Spring 2019) titled Must the Devil Have All the Good Tunes? with the Los Angeles Philharmonic and Gustavo Dudamel, which they take to Boston and New York City; recitals featuring cellist Gautier Capuçon and clarinetist Andreas Ottensamer; and she concludes the residency with a solo recital.

In autumn of 2019, she tours China with the Vienna Philharmonic, presenting concerts in Macao, Guangzhou, Shanghai, and Wuhan. The beginning of 2020 sees Yuja and Gautier Capuçon reuniting for a recital tour featuring eleven dates presented in Europe's premiere venues, including the Philharmonie de Paris and the Wiener Konzerthaus. She then embarks on an extensive solo recital tour, appearing in renowned concert halls throughout North America and Europe, including Carnegie Hall, Davies Symphony Hall, and the Het Concertgebouw, running from February to April.

Additionally, Yuja will be the featured soloist with some of the leading orchestras of North America, including the Boston Symphony Orchestra, under the baton of Andris Nelsons; the Toronto Symphony Orchestra, conducted by Gustavo Gimeno; the San Francisco Symphony, led by Michael Tilson Thomas; and the Philadelphia Orchestra, under the musical direction of Yannick Nézet-Séguin.

Yuja received advanced training in Canada and at Philadelphia's Curtis Institute of Music under Gary Graffman. Her international breakthrough came in 2007 when she replaced Martha Argerich as soloist with the Boston Symphony Orchestra. She later signed an exclusive contract with Deutsche Grammophon and has since established her place among the world's leading artists, with a succession of critically acclaimed performances and recordings. Yuja was named Musical America's Artist of the Year in 2017.



### ORCHESTRA ROSTER Tchaikovsky, Piano Concerto No. 1 in B-flat minor, Opus 23

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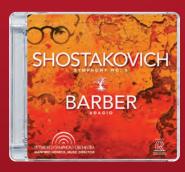
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