

PIOTR ILYICH TCHAIKOVSKY

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

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

PREMIERE OF WORK: Boston, October 25, 1875

Music Hall

Benjamin Johnson Lang, conductor

Hans von Bülow, soloist

APPROXIMATE DURATION: 33 minutes

INSTRUMENTATION: woodwinds and trumpets in pairs, four horns, three trombones, timpani and strings

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 a virtuoso pianist. Tchaikovsky reported the interview in a letter: "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 stellar pianist Hans von Bülow, who was performing Tchaikovsky's piano pieces across Europe. Bülow gladly accepted the dedication and he wrote a letter of praise to Tchaikovsky as soon as he received the score: "The ideas are so original, so powerful; the details are so interesting, and though there are many of them they do not impair the clarity and unity of the work. The form is so mature, so ripe and distinguished in style; intention and labor are everywhere concealed. I would weary you if I were to enumerate all the characteristics of your work, characteristics which compel me to congratulate equally the composer and those who are destined to enjoy it."

After the scathing criticism from Rubinstein, Tchaikovsky was delighted to receive such a response, and he was further gratified when Bülow 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, by Madeleine Schiller and the New York Philharmonic Society conducted by Theodore Thomas on November 12, 1881.) Such a success must at first have puzzled Rubinstein, but eventually he and Tchaikovsky reconciled their differences over the work. Tchaikovsky incorporated some of his suggestions in the 1889 revision, and Rubinstein not only accepted the Concerto, but eventually made it one of the staples of his performing repertory. During the next four years, when Tchaikovsky wrote *Swan Lake*, the *Rococo Variations*, the Third and Fourth Symphonies, the Violin Concerto, and, in 1877, met his benefactress Nadezhda von Meck, he was not only successful enough to leave his teaching job to devote himself entirely to composition, but he also became recognized as one of the greatest composers of his day.

The 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.