

# PETER ILYICH TCHAIKOVSKY

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

## Concerto in D major for Violin and Orchestra, Opus 35 (1878)

PREMIERE OF WORK: Vienna, December 4, 1881

Vienna Philharmonic

Hans Richter, conductor

Adolf Brodsky, soloist

APPROXIMATE DURATION: 34 minutes

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

In the summer of 1877, Tchaikovsky undertook the disastrous marriage that lasted less than three weeks and resulted in his emotional collapse and attempted suicide. He fled from Moscow to his brother Modeste in St. Petersburg, where he recovered his wits and discovered that he could find solace in his work. He spent the late fall and winter completing his Fourth Symphony and the opera *Eugene Onégin*. The brothers decided that travel outside of Russia would be an additional balm to the composer's spirit, and they duly installed themselves at Clarens on Lake Geneva in Switzerland soon after the first of the year.

In Clarens, Tchaikovsky had already begun work on a piano sonata when he was visited by Joseph Kotek, a talented young violinist who had been a student in one of his composition classes at the Moscow Conservatory, who brought with him a score for the recent *Symphonie Espagnole* for Violin and Orchestra by the French composer Edouard Lalo. They read through the piece, and Tchaikovsky was so excited by the possibilities of a work for solo violin and orchestra that he set aside the gestating piano sonata and immediately began a concerto of his own. He worked quickly, completing the present slow movement in a single day when he decided to discard an earlier attempt. (This abandoned piece ended up as the first of the three *Meditations* for Violin and Piano, Opus 42.) By the end of April the Concerto was finished. Tchaikovsky sent the manuscript to Leopold Auer, a friend who headed the violin department at the St. Petersburg Conservatory and who was also Court Violinist to the Czar, hoping to have him premiere the work. Much to the composer's regret, Auer returned the piece as "unplayable," and apparently spread that word with such authority to other violinists that it was more than three years before the Violin Concerto was heard in public.

It was Adolf Brodsky, a former colleague of Tchaikovsky at the Moscow Conservatory, who first accepted the challenge of this Concerto. After having "taken it up and put it down," in his words, for two years, he finally felt secure enough to give the work a try, and he convinced Hans Richter to include it on the concerts of the Vienna Philharmonic in 1881. Brodsky must have felt that he was on something of a crusade during the preparations for the performance. There was only a single full rehearsal allotted for the new work, and most of that was taken up with correcting the parts, which were awash with copyist's errors. Richter wanted to make cuts. The orchestra did not like the music, and at the performance played very quietly so as not to enter with a crashing miscue. Brodsky deserves the appreciation of the music world for standing pat in his belief in the Concerto amid all these adversities. When the performance was done, the audience felt that way as well and applauded him. The piece itself, however, was roundly hissed. The critical barrage was led by that powerful doyen of Viennese conservatism, Eduard Hanslick, whose tasteless summation ("Music that stinks in the ear") irritated Tchaikovsky until the day he died. Despite its initial reception, Brodsky remained devoted to the Concerto, and he played it throughout Europe. The work soon began to gain in popularity, as did the music of Tchaikovsky generally, and it has become one of the most famous concertos in the literature. It is a revealing side-note that Leopold Auer, who had initially shunned the work, eventually came to include it in his repertory, and even taught it to his students, some of whom — Seidel, Zimbalist, Elman, Heifetz, Milstein — became its greatest exponents in the 20th century.

The Concerto opens quietly with a tentative introductory tune. A foretaste of the main theme soon appears in the violins, around which a quick crescendo is mounted to usher in the soloist. After a few unaccompanied measures, the violin presents the movement's lovely main theme above a simple string background. After an elaborated repetition of this melody, a transition follows that eventually involves the entire orchestra and gives the soloist the first of many opportunities for pyrotechnical display. The second theme is the beginning of a long dynamic and rhythmic buildup that leads into the development with a sweeping, balletic presentation of the main theme by the full orchestra. The soloist soon steals back the attention with breathtaking leaps and double stops. The grand balletic mood returns, giving way to a

brilliant cadenza as a link to the recapitulation. The flute sings the main theme for four measures before the violin takes it over, and all then follows the order of the exposition. An exhilarating coda asks for no fewer than four tempo increases, and the movement ends in a brilliant whirl of rhythmic energy.

The slow middle movement begins with a chorale for woodwinds that is heard again at the end of the movement to serve as a frame around the musical picture inside. On the canvas of this scene is displayed a soulful melody intoned by the violin with the plaintive suggestion of a Gypsy fiddler. The finale is joined to the slow movement without a break. With the propulsive spirit of a dashing Cossack *trepak*, the finale flies by amid the soloist's dizzying show of agility and speed. Like the first movement, this one also races toward its final climax. After playing the Concerto's premiere, Adolf Brodsky wrote to Tchaikovsky that the work was "wonderfully beautiful." He was right.

— Dr. Richard E. Rodda