

Tchaikovsky: Symphony No 2 'Ukrainian' Op. 17

Andante sostenuto - Allegro vivo

Andantino marziale, quasi moderato

Allegro molto vivace

Moderato assai - Allegro vivo - Presto

Copious amounts of wine, a midnight flit from an inn and not a little subterfuge on the part of the composer almost led to the loss of Tchaikovsky's **Second Symphony**. Fortunately, a forced return to the scene of his misdemeanour and the swallowing of a large piece of pie enabled the composer and his score to be reunited.

The year of the symphony's composition (1872) was a good one for Tchaikovsky (not necessarily something that can often be said about the composer's life); the finances of his employer, the Moscow Conservatory, had improved, leading to an increased salary. He had completed his opera *The Oprichnink* and although he would later flee rehearsals in dismay at what he had created he had yet to experience the disappointment of hearing his music 'in the flesh'. Not inconceivable is the notion that Tchaikovsky's optimism at this time is reflected in the symphony which is one of his most consistently accessible and joyful works.

At this point in his life Tchaikovsky had developed amicable and supportive relations with the composers of the *moguchaya kuchka* ('mighty handful', otherwise known as 'the five')- Mily Balakirev, Cesar Cui, Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov, Modest Mussorgsky and Alexander Borodin. These composers strove to create a 'new Russian school' of music, drawing on the influences of folk music and other vernacular musical genres (much as did Mahler in Central Europe). Although Tchaikovsky is not considered to be part of this group and his style would later diverge from their principles, the influence of the *kuchka* can be felt in the use of three Ukrainian folk-tunes in his **Second Symphony**. This led to the symphony becoming known as *The Little Russian*, 'Little Russia' being a widely used alternative name of Ukraine. Current international circumstances have led to many performers and concert promoters preferring to nickname the symphony 'The Ukrainian'.

A substantial slow introduction begins the first movement; here solo horn introduces the first of the featured Ukrainian folk-tunes ('Down by Mother Volga'). Tchaikovsky's treatment of this tune again shows the influence of the *kuchka* (and their predecessor Glinka); the melody is presented three times intact against changing backdrops. This particular melody appears numerous times throughout the main *allegro vivo* section of the movement which is characterised by vigorous string-based material contrasted with a more gentle oboe theme.

Three years previously Tchaikovsky had completed another opera, *Undina*. Telling the story of a water nymph who marries a knight to gain a soul, the opera was rejected by the Imperial Theatre of Moscow. The composer later destroyed the score but he did draw on the opera's 'Bridal March' to provide material for the second movement of his new symphony. This movement is cast in rondo form (ABACABA) with the water sprite's wedding music providing the 'A' sections and a second folk-tune providing the 'C' section (once again repeated several times against changing backgrounds).

The *scherzo* third movement abounds in rhythmic inventiveness and rapidly contrasting melodic material that constantly wrong-foots the listener while remaining entirely coherent. The final movement makes much use of the folk-tune 'The Crane', subjecting it to the now-familiar pattern of repetition over changing back-drops. By way of a theatrical flourish, the coda is preceded by a crash of the tam-tam to provide a brief pause in proceedings; the composer was to deploy a similar tactic (*sans* tam-tam) in the finale of his **Fifth Symphony**. This technique is generally considered to be a dramatic masterstroke in works by composers of a robust reputation, but considered a structural weakness in those by less-well respected composers (the third movement of Gershwin's **Concerto in F** is an example of the latter). Whatever the consensus it is a convincing strategy and one which leads the symphony to a rousing conclusion.

The symphony as presented in 1873 (in a performance conducted by Nikolai Rubinstein) differs to the version more commonly heard today; the first movement in particular was substantially rewritten for the revision of 1879-80 and large sections of the whole work rescored. Since its first performance the symphony, like its predecessor ('Winter Daydreams') and immediate successor (the 'Polish') have not enjoyed the same level of popularity as the more famous symphonies 4-6. It is worth noting, however, that there exists a 1940 broadcast recording of composer Igor Stravinsky conducting the work with the New York Philharmonic. Stravinsky, certainly in the earlier phases of his compositional career, continued much of the work of the *kuchka* in the absorption of folk-music in his works and it is fitting testament to Tchaikovsky's achievement that the later composer provided such searing advocacy of the symphony.

Brahms: Piano Concerto No 2 Op.83

Allegro non troppo

Allegro appassionato

Andante

Allegretto grazioso

I want to tell you that I have written a very small piano concerto with a very small and pretty scherzo

Thus wrote Johannes Brahms to Clara Schumann, referring to his **Second Piano Concerto**. Whether these comments were a result of a mischievous streak or a sense of self-deprecation, they could not be further removed from reality. The concerto is, in fact, one of the largest of its type, outstripping its (not insubstantial) predecessor and all four of his symphonies in terms of scale.

The **First Piano Concerto** of two decades earlier was already of unusually epic proportions, clearly conceived along symphonic lines as a 'stop-gap' before Brahms felt confident enough to compose his **First Symphony** (the shadow of Beethoven's symphonic legacy somewhat daunted the composer). By the time of the **Second Concerto** Brahms had completed his first two symphonies and his (also quite long) **Violin Concerto**. As such the new piano concerto reflected the composer's greater experience and facility. In contrast to the earlier piano concerto, the second concerto demonstrates a tauter integration of themes and a wider variety of colour. It also has a whole extra movement, the (anything but) 'small and pretty scherzo'.

Paradoxes abound in this concerto. Aside from Brahms's description of the work as quoted above, he was apparently none too happy about a female pianist's performance of the First Concerto and vowed to compose a work that would be unplayable by a mere woman. Sexism aside (particularly ridiculous when one listens to a pianist such as Gina Bachauer perform the piece), the results lack the somewhat macho posturing of the earlier work opting instead for more light and shade. Despite the epic scale the actual musical content does not follow the 'heroic battle' model exemplified by Tchaikovsky and has more in common with the dialogue/collaboration tone struck by the Schumanns (both Robert and Clara).

The first movement opens gently with a horn melody punctuated by rippling piano figurations- no heroic entry of the soloist here. Once the main *allegro* commences however the music gains in both drama and momentum, the opening horn theme now transformed into something more stirring. Throughout this sonata-form movement tension is built through the development of themes and the interplay between soloist and orchestra.

The second movement (that 'small and pretty scherzo') is marked *allegro appassionato*. Passionate it certainly is; this is no small interlude but a weighty scherzo on a massive scale. This is Brahms at his most belligerent and exciting. The slow movement is notable for beginning and ending with a lengthy solo for principal cello. Aside from a more stormy central interlude, the movement as a whole is characterised by a chamber-like approach.

The finale provides a joyful conclusion to the work. Cleverly introducing and developing six identifiable themes, there is much colour and more than a touch of Central European folk-music. It is worth remembering that Brahms, like a number of composers of the era, had a liking for introducing local spice into his music- most notably in his set of *Hungarian Dances*, his collections of German Folk Songs and the finale of his **First Piano Quartet**. Here the influence can be felt in the dance-like material at the movement's outset and the yearning theme that follows.

The concerto was first performed in Budapest in 1881 with the composer as soloist. It was immediately successful and has remained so ever since. Throughout the twentieth century the work has been recorded numerous times- and thankfully, despite Brahms' sentiments, with great success by women pianists as well.

Programme notes (C) Owen E Walton, 2024.