

Tchaikovsky

Piano Concerto No. 1 • 'Mozartiana' Suite

Constantine Orbelian
Philharmonia Orchestra
Neeme Järvi

collect

Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky (1840–1893)

**Piano Concerto No. 1 in B flat minor,
Op. 23** 37:39

in b-Moll · en si bémol mineur

- | | | |
|---|--|-------|
| 1 | I Allegro non troppo e molto maestoso –
Allegro con spirito | 22:47 |
| 2 | II Andantino semplice – Prestissimo – Tempo 1 | 7:29 |
| 3 | III Allegro con fuoco | 7:17 |

**Suite No. 4 in G major ‘Mozartiana’,
Op. 61** 24:52

in G-Dur · en sol majeur

- | | | |
|---|---|-----------------|
| 4 | I Gigue: Allegro | 1:46 |
| 5 | II Menuet: Moderato | 4:16 |
| 6 | III Preghiera (D’après une transcription de F. Liszt):
Andante non tanto | 3:53 |
| 7 | IV Thème et Variations: Allegro giusto | 14:52 |
| | | TT 62:43 |

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Tchaikovsky: Piano Concerto No. 1/‘Mozartiana’ Suite

Tchaikovsky's 'Mozartiana' Suite and First Piano Concerto are conscious and unconscious tributes to the past. Both suggest the warmth and respect felt by one genius for others. But while this is obvious enough in 'Mozartiana' it is less evident in the Piano Concerto. Here, the spirit or ghost of Schumann hovers behind Tchaikovsky's lyrical impulse, his free juxtaposition of drama and introspection (*Florestan* and *Eusebius*, if you like), his love of syncopation and swaggering martial dotted rhythms and his most quixotic flights of fancy (the central *Prestissimo* in the *Andantino*). Granted, Tchaikovsky's material and its opulent treatment are indelibly Russian, yet the effect is invariably of a Slavonic Schumann, as if the older Romantic was glimpsed through Russian eyes. Tchaikovsky called one of his Op. 72 piano pieces *Un poco di Schumann*; entitled No. 11 from his Op. 19 *Variations Alla Schumann*, and in his large-scale G major Piano Sonata unsuccessfully attempted to cover his tracks with much bluster and bombast. The influence is all-pervasive.

However, unlike the Piano Sonata, which Tchaikovsky despised and which ran the gauntlet of a bad press, the B flat minor Concerto achieved a popularity which has

never waned. Its worldwide acclaim, perhaps understandably, is even greater than that accorded the Schumann and Grieg Concertos, Rachmaninov's Second or Beethoven's 'Emperor', all mainstays of the repertoire. Certainly few concertos have played more directly on the strongest and most immediate of human emotions.

But despite such resonant praise, Tchaikovsky's First had a decidedly chequered history. Tchaikovsky was neurotically in need of assurance or approval and, unfortunately, chose the eminent pianist Nicholas Rubinstein as his confidant regarding the Concerto. Rubinstein's attack was sustained and sadistic, and although his response can be seen in retrospect as the tirade of a conservative, Tchaikovsky's self-esteem was seriously damaged. That he was not totally overwhelmed by such derision says much for his resilience. A hasty re-dedication to Hans von Bülow and the first performance in Russia in 1875 was followed by a triumphant premiere in Boston where 'the greatest of all battles for piano and orchestra' had its finale encoored. Rubinstein, now aware of qualities he had overlooked (and also sensing a missed opportunity) recanted, chimed in with a chorus

of approval, and later became one of the Concerto's staunchest champions.

At the same time Rubinstein's first response was understandable, even if his way of expressing it was unforgiveable. The colossal introduction, *maestoso* in the fullest sense, is jettisoned (an extravagance unknown to Tchaikovsky's predecessors) and the Concerto proper does not commence until bar ten. The subsequent fight for supremacy, the war-like spirit between piano and orchestra must have seemed more an athletic than artistic achievement. The transformation of a French *chansonnette*, 'Il faut s'amuser, danser et rire' into high-speed whimsy in the second movement offer further evidence of the grotesque, and the finale's all-Ukrainian force and momentum confirmed music in which anything goes, in which everything is in excess.

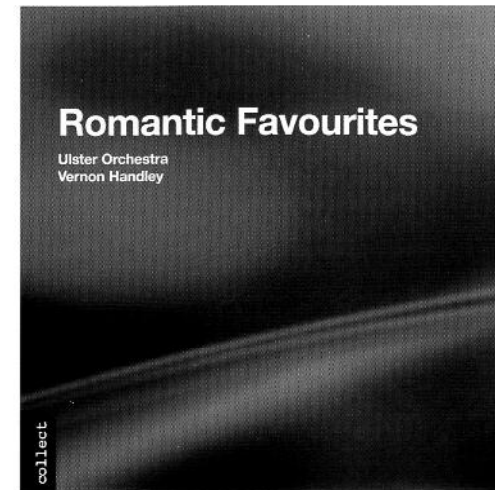
This initial stumbling block aside, the Concerto's success was quickly assured. A cautious prediction in a local Italian paper as late as 1940, that the First Concerto could one day become famous, is among the most amusing of critical curios, and the composer who so aristocratically hated 'mankind in the mass' achieved ultimate popularity.

For Tchaikovsky, Mozart was a 'musical Christ', a composer whose formal clarity and

perfection accentuated his own acute sense of deficiency. It is therefore hardly surprising that he should wish to pay tribute to his idol and transform, with idiosyncratic skill, a most enterprising and unusual selection of Mozart's piano pieces. 'Mozartiana' was composed in 1887 when Tchaikovsky felt the need to relax from more strenuous creativity and offer 'older things in a new presentation'. He chose the *Gigue* of 1789 (No. 11 from a set of twelve pieces), clearly attracted by its curious, almost Alkanesque oddity, a *Minuet* from the same set of pieces, which integrates convention and prophetic chromaticism, *Preghiera* ('Prayer'), the motet *Ave verum corpus*, K. 618 transcribed by Liszt, and finally the Ten Variations on 'Unser dummer Pöbel meint' from Glück's *singspiel Pilger von Mekka* K. 455. As with Bach–Busoni or Schubert–Liszt one is more aware of the transcriber than the transcribed. There are some notably exotic touches in the Variations with percussion and flourishes or cadenzas for a variety of soloists providing a distinctly personal and Russian flavour. And, although some have spoken disparagingly of Mozart *au sucré*, Tchaikovsky's affection as well as his playful ingenuity are never in doubt.

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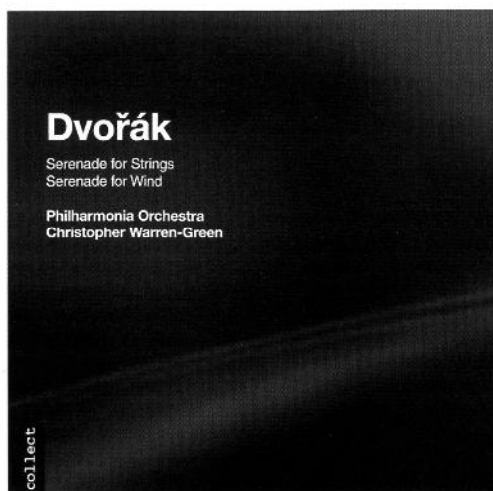
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