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Tchaikovsky Symphony 2

"Little Russian"
in C minor Op.17

Capriccio Italien
Oslo Philharmonic Orchestra
Mariss Jansons, Conductor

Symphony No. 2 in C minor Op. 17
"Little Russian" (34:03)

Revised 1879 Version

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- 2 II – Andantino marziale, quasi moderato (6:39)
- 3 III – Scherzo and Trio: Allegro molto vivace (5:08)
- 4 IV – Finale: Moderato assai – Allegro vivo (10:02)
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DIGITAL

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Peter Ilyich Tchaikovsky (1840-1893)

After the trouble and tribulation caused him by the composition of his First Symphony, it was another six years before Tchaikovsky attempted a further work in a form he never found particularly congenial, though he did think he ought to try to master it. His Second Symphony was begun with this in mind, to improve on the faults of style he felt there were in the earlier work, especially as regards 'symmetry of form', as he put it in a letter, but it was so enthusiastically received at its Moscow première on 7 February 1873 that the Russian Musical Society changed its programmes in order to give a repeat performance two months later.

Its immediate appeal at the time was to some extent due to the composer's use of melodic themes borrowed from Ukrainian folksong, which led to Nikolay Kashkin, a teacher and critic and friend of Tchaikovsky, calling it the 'Little Russian' Symphony (Little Russia being the common name for the Ukraine). The nickname stuck, to become virtually the work's subtitle. Another distinction it has among Tchaikovsky's seven Symphonies (counting *Manfred* with the numbered six) is in musical subject-matter that reflects a wholly unmorbid side of the composer's personality.

He began it during a Summer holiday, one of several spent with his married sister, Alexandra Davidova, and her family at Kamenka, their home in the Ukraine, which she encouraged her brother to look on as a second home for him too. He was then aged 32, and dividing his time between teaching as Professor of Harmony at the Moscow Conservatory headed by Nikolay Rubinstein (who conducted the Second Symphony's première) and his own composition, most recently the *Romeo and Juliet* Fantasy-overture, a String Quartet (No. 1 in D minor) and an opera, *The Oprichnik*, which he learned at the end of the year had been accepted for production at St. Petersburg.

By the time he returned to Moscow he was 'so engrossed' in the Symphony, he wrote, that other work was irksome, and it was finished and orchestrated during the Winter. He played the finale over on the piano at a party given by Rimsky-Korsakov early in January and was delighted by the enthusiasm this aroused. Even so, and despite the successful concert performances, he remained personally dissatisfied

with some aspects of it, and six to seven years later (in the wake of his Third and Fourth Symphonies) he rewrote much of it into the revised version which is now usually performed and is recorded here.

His most extensive revision was in the Symphony's first and third movements, though he mentions an 'enormous cut' in the finale which perhaps improved its proportions. At any rate, the work made new friends when it was first heard in its revised form at St. Petersburg on 12 February 1881, and the present-day listener will find it generally lighter in expressive character than his other Symphonies. Its slow introduction to the first movement has a variant of a folksong, 'Down by Mother Volga', heard as a horn solo, which later emerges amid the development of two other ideas and is reintroduced as a better ending to the movement than either of those.

Instead of a lyrical slow movement, Tchaikovsky made use of a Bridal March from his rejected opera, *Undine*, composed three years earlier. Now adapted as the basis of a rondo-scheme, it alternates with a string melody as a first contrasting episode and a central passage derived from a folksong, 'Spin, O my spinner', found in the '50 Russian Folksongs' he arranged for piano duet. This movement is an attractive partner to the Scherzo, which most resembles Tchaikovsky's ballet music in its rhythmic vivacity, especially a trio-section that foreshadows a *Sleeping Beauty* dance and which, at the end, is played again in 2/8 time by the woodwind while the rest play the main scherzo music in 3/8.

Folksong again furnishes the finale, principally one called 'The Crane' which Tchaikovsky overheard the Davidov's butler singing at Kamenka. There is a contrasting melody of Tchaikovsky's own, a syncopated little dance tune, but the movement is chiefly concerned with the folksong theme varied not in terms of changing the melody much but of presenting it, or phrases from it, in different keys and instrumental colours, gradually absorbing the second tune until a loud stroke on the tam-tam heralds a *presto* coda that carries the work home in a bright C major.

During the same visit to Rome early in 1880 when he undertook some of the revision on his Second Symphony, Tchaikovsky began one of his most exuberant works, the *Capriccio Italien*. In a letter from Rome he wrote to a friend: 'I have sketched the rough draft of an *Italian Capriccio* based on popular melodies. It will be effective because of the wonderful melodies I happened to pick up, partly from published collections and partly out in the streets with my own ears'. On his return to Russia later that year he scored it for a large orchestra, and it won him another success when it was first performed at Moscow on 18 December 1880.

His handling of the orchestra is daring and immensely effective for its time, the work modelled (as he acknowledged) on Glinka's 'Spanish' pieces like the *Capriccio brillante* (1845), and displaying unashamed pride in the blaze and blend of instrumental colour. The initial fanfare is based on a cavalry bugle-call the composer heard each night during his stay at a Roman hotel close to the Corazziere's barracks at Caracalla. As it subsides, the strings insinuate a swaying, nostalgic melody like a Venetian gondolier's song, and this is continued at some length before the bugle theme loudly breaks in again.

With a change of key the oboes introduce another typical song-tune, more lighthearted than the first, with a diverting echo effect decorating the end of each phrase. On its first repeat it is boldly given to two cornets and echoed by the glockenspiel. Its continuing and elaborate treatment is followed successively by another popular tune, a dashing march, and a return of the gondolier's song. The finale is a *saltarello*, a fast Roman dance in 6/8 time, through which the song-melody bursts forth to a broad and exciting climax.

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The Oslo Philharmonic Orchestra can trace its roots back to the last century to the period of Edvard Grieg and Johan Svendsen. Grieg was actually one of the founders and first conductors of the orchestra, which was established in 1871. This was a period of cultural growth and activity in Norway, when the authors Henrik Ibsen and Bjørnstjerne Bjørnson and the painters Adolph Tidemann and Hans Gude became well known and the first collections of Norwegian folk music were published.

The orchestra became permanently established as an independent organization in 1919, when its conductor was Georg Schneevoigt. Later artistic directors were Ignaz Neumark, Jose Eibenschütz, Issay Dobrowen, Odd Gruner-Hegge, Olav Kielland and Øivin Fjeldstad. Over the last 20 years the orchestra has gone through a tremendous artistic growth and achieved a particular reputation for the fine quality and tone of the wind and brass sections. A number of outstanding conductors have been instrumental in its development: Herbert Blomstedt (1962-68), Miliatiades Caridis (1969-75), Okko Kamu (1975-79) and Mariss Jansons (from 1979). The working facilities have also been greatly improved with the completion of the Oslo Concert Hall in 1977, a multi-million dollar complex which is now the home of the orchestra and where it gives more than 60 concerts a year. It has made a number of recordings for various companies and been on tour in Europe, Britain and the U.S.A., receiving unanimous praise from major critics.

Mariss Jansons is chief conductor of the Oslo Philharmonic Orchestra and under his leadership the orchestra has thrived greatly and reached a new artistic level and achieved some outstanding interpretations. In 1982 Jansons and the orchestra received the Norwegian 'Grammy' Award – Spellemannsprisen – for their recording of works by Grieg and in 1983 Jansons received the Norwegian music critics' award for his interpretation of Shostakovich's Symphony No. 7.

Mariss Jansons was born in Riga in 1943 and trained at the Leningrad Music Conservatory, studying violin, viola, piano and conducting. After his graduation in 1969 he continued his studies at the Vienna Music Academy under Hans Swarovsky and also in Salzburg under Herbert von Karajan. He became

internationally known when he was among the prize-winners in the Herbert von Karajan competition in Berlin in 1971. Later that year he was appointed assistant to the legendary Jevgeny Mravinsky of the Leningrad Philharmonic.

He is at present conductor of the Leningrad Philharmonic and he conducted the Moscow State Orchestra on its tour of England and Northern Ireland in Autumn 1983 as well as the Oslo Philharmonic on its English tour in the Spring the same year. He has also conducted the major orchestras of 22 different countries.

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Recording Producer: Brian Couzens.

Sound Supervision: Ralph Couzens. Sound Engineer: Dag Kristoffersen.

Recorded in the Oslo Philharmonic Concert Hall in September and April 1985.

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