

March 26, 2010

Notes on the Program by Ken Meltzer

Overture to *Ruslan and Lyudmila* (1842)

Mikhail Glinka was born in Novospasskoye (now, Glinka), Russia, on June 1, 1804 and died in Berlin, Germany, on February 15, 1857. The first performance of *Ruslan and Lyudmila* took place at the Imperial Theater in St. Petersburg, Russia, on December 9, 1842. The Overture to *Ruslan and Lyudmila* is scored for two flutes, two oboes, two clarinets, two bassoons, contrabassoon, four horns, two trumpets, three trombones, timpani and strings. Approximate performance time is five minutes.

Mikhail Glinka is one of the great pioneers in the history of Russian music. After studying in St. Petersburg, Glinka traveled to Italy and Germany in the early 1830s. There, Glinka heard and studied the music of Ludwig van Beethoven, as well as the Italian *bel canto* opera composers Gaetano Donizetti and Vincenzo Bellini. Glinka himself wrote works based upon themes from popular Italian operas. But in his memoirs, Glinka recalled:

All the pieces that I wrote to please the Milan composers...only served to convince me that I had followed a path foreign to my own instincts and frankly, that I could never be an Italian myself. Feelings of homesickness led me to gradually find my own Russian form of expression.

Glinka's search for a Russian "form of expression" culminated in triumph on December 9, 1836, in St. Petersburg. There, Glinka's opera *A Life for the Tsar* premiered at the Imperial Theater. *A Life for the Tsar*, based upon an incident in Russian history, and featuring Russian folk melodies, immediately won the hearts of the St. Petersburg audience. Glinka's *A Life for the Tsar* is universally recognized as the first Russian national opera.

Glinka's second opera, *Ruslan and Lyudmila*, premiered in St. Petersburg on December 9, 1842. Based upon a fantastic tale by Alexander Pushkin, *Ruslan and Lyudmila* takes place in 9th century Russia. Lyudmila, daughter of the Grand Prince of Kiev, is about to marry the knight Ruslan. When monsters kidnap Lyudmila, Ruslan sets out to rescue his beloved, with (after much adventure) happy results.

While complete performances of *Ruslan and Lyudmila* are rare outside of Russia, the opera's Overture has become a concert hall favorite. The brief and sparkling Overture, featuring melodies from the opera, sprints to a brilliant close.

Concerto for Coloratura Soprano and Orchestra, Opus 82 (1943)

Reinhold Glière was born in Kiev, Russia, on January 11, 1875, and died in Moscow, Russia, on June 23, 1956. In addition to the solo coloratura soprano, the

Concerto is scored for two flutes, two oboes, two clarinets, two bassoons, three horns, timpani, percussion, harp and strings. Approximate performance time is fourteen minutes.

Reinhold Glière was born in Kiev on January 11, 1875. The son of a wind instrument maker, Glière demonstrated an early interest in music, playing the violin and composing. After studies in Kiev, Glière entered at the Moscow Conservatory in 1894. There he studied with such notable composers as Sergei Taneyev, Anton Arensky, and Mikhail Ippolitov-Ivanov.

Throughout his adult life, Glière was active as a teacher. In the summers of 1902 and 1903, he taught the young Sergei Prokofiev. In 1914, Glière was named director of the Kiev Conservatory. In 1920, Glière became a Professor of Composition at the Moscow Conservatory, a position he held until his retirement in 1941. From 1938 to 1948, Glière served as Chairman of the organizing committee of the USSR Composers' Union. In 1938, Glière received the title of "People's Artist of the USSR," one of many awards bestowed upon the composer.

Glière composed in a decidedly Romantic style that often drew upon Russian folk legends and music. Among Glière's most well known works are his epic Symphony No. 3, "Ilya Morumets" (1909-1911) and the ballets *The Red Poppy* (1926-7) (which includes the famous "Russian Sailors' Dance") and *The Bronze Horseman* (1948-9).

A coloratura soprano is a high voice notable for exceptional beauty and agility. In his Concerto for Coloratura Soprano and Orchestra (1943), Glière showcases both of these qualities. The Concerto is in two movements, with a lyrical and expansive *Andante* followed by a cheery and brilliant *Allegro*. There is no text assigned to the soprano's music. Rather, she sings a wordless vocalise, thereby emphasizing the instrumental qualities of this unique and remarkable voice category.

Symphony No. 6 in B minor, Opus 74 ("Pathétique") (1893)

Peter Ilyich Tchaikovsky was born in Kamsko-Votkinsk, Russia, on May 7, 1840, and died in St. Petersburg, Russia, on November 6, 1893. The first performance of the "Pathétique" Symphony took place in St. Petersburg on October 28, 1893, with the composer conducting. The "Pathétique" Symphony is scored for piccolo, three flutes, two oboes, two clarinets, two bassoons, four horns, two trumpets, three trombones, tuba, timpani, bass drum, cymbals, tam tam, and strings. Approximate performance time is forty-six minutes.

Peter Ilyich Tchaikovsky conducted the world premiere of his Sixth and final Symphony, the "Pathétique," in St. Petersburg on October 28, 1893. Nine days later, Tchaikovsky was dead at the age of 53. For years, the accepted cause of Tchaikovsky's demise, first advanced by his brother, Modest, was that the composer died as a result of the cholera epidemic then plaguing Russia.

Throughout his life, Tchaikovsky frequently suffered from depression, and, on at least one prior occasion, attempted to kill himself. And in the past few decades, evidence has

surfaced that Tchaikovsky may well have committed suicide, perhaps in order to avoid the humiliation of the revelation of an illicit relationship.

A consensus on this volatile issue is unlikely. Nevertheless, it is difficult to listen to Tchaikovsky's final Symphony and not sense the composer's premonition of his own demise. As Tchaikovsky confided to his nephew, Vladimir Davidov, to whom he dedicated the "Pathétique" Symphony:

Whilst I was on my travels I had an idea for another symphony, a programme symphony this time; but the programme will be left as an enigma—let people guess it for themselves. This programme is so intensely personal that as I was mentally composing it on my travels I frequently wept copiously.

It should also be noted that between the two World Wars, the following sketch by Tchaikovsky was discovered among his papers:

The ultimate essence of the plan of the Symphony is LIFE. First part—all impulsive passion, confidence, thirst for activity. Must be short. (Finale—DEATH—result of collapse.)

Second part love; third disappointments, fourth ends dying away (also short).

Whatever program Tchaikovsky intended for the Sixth Symphony, he chose a unique format for its presentation. Tchaikovsky's Fourth and Fifth Symphonies—both depictions of a struggle with fate—conclude with rousing, triumphant finales. However, Tchaikovsky informed Davidov that, in the "Pathétique," "Formally there will be much that is new in this symphony, and incidentally the Finale won't be a loud Allegro but, on the contrary, a very slow-moving Adagio."

Tchaikovsky realized his departure from symphonic convention might well hinder the work's acceptance. As he admitted to Davidov: "I shall consider it the usual (thing) and unsurprising if this symphony is torn to pieces or is little appreciated; it won't be the first time (this has happened)."

Indeed, the premiere of Tchaikovsky's "Pathétique" (a nickname suggested by the composer's brother, Modest) was far from a triumph. The critics and audience—no doubt bewildered by the work's frequently morbid tone and unconventional structure—offered a lukewarm reception. Still, Tchaikovsky maintained faith in his new Symphony, and informed his publisher: "It's not that it displeased, but it produced some bewilderment. As far as I'm concerned, I take more pride in it than in any other of my works."

In time, Tchaikovsky's "Pathétique" has become recognized as the composer's symphonic masterpiece, a fitting summation of the life and career of Russia's most beloved composer. It is a work of extraordinary power, a Symphony that presents a stunning array of emotions, cast in a bold, revolutionary format. For his part,

Tchaikovsky left no doubt as to his affection for the “Pathétique.” As he wrote to Davidov: “I definitely consider it the best, and, in particular, *the most sincere* of all my works. I love it as I have never loved any of my other musical offspring.”

The opening movement opens with a pensive slow introduction (*Adagio*) that leads to the principal *Allegro non troppo*. The fierce battle depicted in the central portion of the opening movement final resolves to a peaceful close. Instead of the traditional slow second movement, Tchaikovsky substitutes a leisurely dance (*Allegro con grazia*). The music is in the character of a waltz. However, the five (rather than three) beats to the bar impart a sense of unease—even, perhaps, of disorientation. The third movement is a vigorous march (*Allegro molto vivace*) with an irrepressible momentum, right to the thunderous closing bars. The slow-tempo closing movement (*Adagio lamentoso*), after a final struggle, fades to heartbreaking silence.