

## **Tchaikovsky and His Contemporaries**

### **Notes on the program by Artistic Director Nikolai Kachanov**

Tchaikovsky's work makes an extraordinarily valuable contribution to the world's musical culture. He is one of the world's greatest composers and a bright representative of Russian Romanticism. Along with the work of his contemporaries, he marked a new stage in the development of Russian music. This new stage was reached thanks to the efforts of two brothers, Anton and Nikolai Rubinstein. The Rubinsteins had an influential role in Tchaikovsky's destiny, the creation of professional music education in Russia, and the development of the Russian school of composition.

Anton Rubinstein's inexhaustible energy allowed him to successfully combine active performing, composing, and teaching. He was recognized as the greatest concert pianist of his era in Europe and Russia, including Rubinstein's triumphant tour in the USA in 1872–73. In 1852, Anton presented Grand Duchess Elena Pavlovna with a project that brought fundamental change to the musical life of Russia. The Choral Academy was opened in 1858; then the Russian Musical Society opened in St. Petersburg, with Anton as its first director, in 1859. In half a century, the Society achieved great heights in musical development in Russia, bringing it to the same level as in Europe. Later, in 1862, Anton founded the first conservatory in Russia, in St. Petersburg. Tchaikovsky became one of his students.

Anton not only “opened the window to Europe”, introducing Europeans to Russian composers previously unknown there, but also “opened wide the doors,” allowing European music culture to enter Russia.

About himself, Anton said: “Russians call me German, Germans call me Russian, Jews call me a Christian, Christians a Jew; pianists call me a composer, composers call me a pianist. The classicists think me a futurist, and the futurists call me a reactionary. My conclusion is that I am neither fish nor fowl—a pitiful individual.”

As a composer, Anton prepared the way for the further development of Russian professional music. His were the first Russian symphonies, anticipating the symphonic style of Rimsky-Korsakov, Borodin, and Tchaikovsky. His piano concertos opened the way to this genre in the works of Tchaikovsky and Rachmaninoff. Anton was first to write concerti for violin and orchestra, piano sonatas, etudes, and more. Before Anton, these genres were absent from Russian music.

His melodies, with their lyrical warmth, influenced future generations of Russian composers. Melody is the main element of Russian Romanticism in music. Sergei Rachmaninoff said, “Melodic ingenuity, in the highest sense of the word, is the main life goal of the composer. If he is unable to create melodies that have the right to last for a long time, then he has little chance of mastering composing skills.” (For the curious, I'd like to add that modern musical science about melody reached its apex in the works of Russian musicologist Vladimir Zak. His work gives researchers a universal tool for studying explicit and hidden patterns that characterize a tonal melody.)

Anton Rubinstein's *Melody in F* (op. 3, No. 1) gained wide popularity and became the composer's calling card. Anton wrote an interesting metaphor for the way a composer's musical

thought transforms into a melody—he compared it to the friction of a match on a hard surface that turns a tree into a blaze. In our program, the idea of the birth of a melody is illustrated in the arrangement of Anton Rubinstein’s *Melody in F* by Mikhail Zeiger.

### **Tchaikovsky: Greetings to Rubinstein**

Tchaikovsky adored Anton Rubinstein for many reasons. Tchaikovsky called Rubinstein “not only a great pianist and composer, but also a man of rare nobility, frank, honest, generous, alien to low feelings, with a clear mind and endless kindness.” Tchaikovsky’s *Greetings to Rubinstein* is a setting of Polonsky’s poem, which includes expressions like “star,” “bright genius,” and “divine.” Interestingly, this piece is written as a polonaise. Historically, from the time of Peter the Great in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, the polonaise marked the ceremonial entrance of the tsar and his suite, and later, under Tsar Nikolai I, it became the Imperial dance. Since the polonaise symbolized the Russian monarchy, it was not by chance that Tchaikovsky chose it to recognize Rubinstein’s elevated status in the musical world.

### **Tchaikovsky: Let My Prayer Arise and Nature and Love**

Many of you are probably familiar with Tchaikovsky’s music. However, the two works on today’s program are not his best-known. They illustrate the extraordinary richness of the composer’s inner world. These two compositions reflect the dual aspects of Tchaikovsky’s nature that permeate his music—namely, the human and the spiritual. Awestruck spirituality is colored and deepened by human emotion in *Let My Prayer Arise*, while human striving for joy reaches out and extends itself to an almost religious ecstasy in the cantata *Nature and Love*.

*Nature and Love*—the title speaks to the source of the composer’s creative genius. This cantata, with its dialogue between “Oh, no!” and “Oh, yes!” is a setting of the composer’s own text, and is a moving and beautiful contribution from this Russian Romantic genius.

### **Scriabin: Etude in C-Sharp Minor**

Early in his life Scriabin was influenced by the works of Frederic Chopin, but also in Scriabin’s early works, especially in his *C-sharp Minor Etude* with its melodies, there is a connection with Russian musical traditions and a commonality with Tchaikovsky’s lyricism.

Scriabin’s *C-Sharp Minor Etude*, like Rubinstein’s *Melody in F* with its poignant and heartfelt melody, has a special appeal. The world’s great pianists continue to keep the *Etude* in their repertoire, remarkable when we consider it was written when Scriabin was only 16 years old. The presence of voices and cello in this arrangement reveals even more deeply the feelings of dreams, hopes, and beautiful memories tinged by an inexpressibly deep sadness. In this way it feels connected to Rachmaninoff’s *Vocalise*, a classic example of Russian Romanticism. Sadly, Scriabin did not compose for chorus, except for a few choral episodes in his symphonies. This first-ever choral arrangement of the *C-Sharp Minor Etude* by Mikhail Zeiger opens up the possibility for choral singers to come into contact with the wonderful music of this great composer.

### **Rachmaninoff: Vocalise**

Rachmaninoff originally wrote the *Vocalise* for voice (soprano or tenor) and piano and published it in 1912 as the last of his *Fourteen Songs*. RCCNY commissioned this arrangement for choir, cello, and piano from Mikhail Zeiger a hundred years later, in 2012. This piece is uniquely

powerful in its internal expression of longing, tenderness, and hope. It is nostalgic about something unforgettably beautiful.

### **Anton Arensky: Three Quartets, for voices and cello**

One of Tchaikovsky's most enthusiastic admirers was his contemporary Anton Arensky, whose *Three Quartets for Chorus and Cello* is a gem of Russian Romanticism. After graduating from the St. Petersburg Conservatory in 1882, Anton Arensky became a professor at the Moscow Conservatory. Among his students there were Alexander Scriabin, Sergei Rachmaninoff, and Alexander Grechaninov.

Tchaikovsky was the greatest influence on Arensky's musical compositions. Especially popular is Arensky's *Variations on a Theme of Tchaikovsky* for string orchestra, Op. 35a. Arensky arranged this from the adagio movement of his own *Second String Quartet*, and based on one of Tchaikovsky's *Songs for Children*, Op. 54. Arensky was perhaps at his best in chamber music, in which genre he wrote two string quartets, two piano trios, and a piano quintet.

### **Taneyev: John of Damascus**

Sergei Taneyev dedicated the cantata *John of Damascus* to the memory of Nikolai Rubinstein. Nikolai was a prominent public figure, brilliant pianist, conductor, and composer. Like his brother, Anton, he was actively involved in music education in Russia. Nikolai initiated and supervised the organization of the Moscow branch of the Russian Music Society in 1860 and appeared in its symphony and chamber concerts as a conductor and soloist. In 1860 he inaugurated the society's music classes, which served as the foundation for the establishment of the Moscow Conservatory in 1866. Until his death Nikolai was a professor at the conservatory and its director. Sergei Taneyev was among his students.

Nikolai's premature, sudden death in the spring of 1881 was a severe blow to all who knew and loved him, especially the musicians who revered him. Tchaikovsky dedicated his Piano Trio in A Minor (for piano, violin, and cello) to Nikolai Rubinstein with the subtitle, "In memory of a great artist." For both Tchaikovsky and Taneyev, the tragic death of their friend and mentor was a great personal calamity.

The three-part cantata *John of Damascus*, composed in 1883-84, is also known as *A Russian Requiem*. The cantata weaves a dense musical tapestry around an ancient Russian church chant, *Give Rest, O Christ*. It serves as the introduction and is also repeated in the third movement's fugue. This cantata became not only one of Taneyev's most notable works but also one of the pinnacles of Russian classical choral music. The composer's masterful use of counterpoint led many musicologists to compare him to J.S. Bach himself.