Notes on the Program

BY JAMES M. KELLER, PROGRAM ANNOTATOR

For much of its history Russia has been far enough removed from the musical mainstream of central and western Europe to be able to maintain a distinct tradition in its own music. Certainly, the Russian Court cultivated its ties to the West to some degree, and in the late 18th and early 19th centuries many of Russia's leading musical figures were actually émigrés — sometimes temporary, sometimes long-term — from Italy, France, or Germany. However, before the 19th century had unrolled very far, a homegrown talent pool emerged, and as the century progressed Russian composers developed their own concert traditions that could rival those of Western Europe, even while displaying a distinct aesthetic.

Music became a national passion. Mikhail Glinka established an independent classical music tradition in the 1830s, and, ever since, Russians have smothered their composers and musicians with Czarist medallions, Lenin Prizes, Stalin Awards, Artist of the People Commendations, and the like. For tonight's visit to the land of the Russian giants, the New York Philharmonic turns to masterful orchestral works by three of Russia's most enduringly popular classical composers: Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky, Sergei Rachmaninoff, and Aram Khachaturian.

An impassioned reader, **Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky** enjoyed close familiarity with the literary classics of both Russia and Western Europe. Great books served as the inspiration for many of his instrumental compositions, including writings by Shakespeare (*Romeo and Juliet, The Tempest, Hamlet*), Dante (*Francesca da Rimini*), Byron (*Manfred*), and Ostrovsky (*The Storm*). Some of his operas also boast distinguished literary lineage, including *Snegurochka* (*The Snow Maiden*, after Ostrovsky), *Vakula the Smith* (after Gogol), *The Maid of Orleans* (after Schiller), and, most remarkably, his three operas after Pushkin: ***Eugene Onegin***, *Mazeppa,* and *The Queen of Spades*.

Pushkin's narrative poem *Eugene Onegin* (written in 1831), as expanded into a libretto by Tchaikovsky and a colleague, offers one of those plots that make opera what it is. In the story we meet two sisters: one is engaged to a passionate fellow, while the other has a crush on the passionate fellow's foppish friend, Eugene Onegin. Onegin rejects the second sister but nurtures an interest in the first sister, as a result of which his friend challenges him to a duel and is thereby killed. Onegin flees abroad, but years later he returns to Russia, where, at a ball, he meets the elegant wife of a prince who turns out to be the sister he once rejected. He realizes that he does love her after all, and he tries to pry her away from the noble life she has found. Although she acknowledges that she still loves Onegin, she has chosen her path and dismisses him.

The Polonaise we hear in tonight's concert is the opening music of the opera's third and final act, which takes place during the ball at an aristocratic mansion in St. Petersburg. The polonaise was a dance of Polish origins that, after the 18th century, was widely embraced as a subject by concert composers outside Poland. Always in triple time and sporting the characteristic accompanimental rhythm of bum bum-da bum bum bum bum, it progressed from its folkish beginnings to gain a reputation for high-minded elegance and ceremonial spirit, which is precisely the role Tchaikovsky's Polonaise serves in his opera.

Tchaikovsky dedicated his ***Romeo and Juliet* Overture-Fantasy** to Mily Balakirev, a mover and shaker of Russian musical politics beginning in the 1850s. Soon after the two met in 1869 Tchaikovsky dedicated his newest symphonic poem, titled *Fatum* ("Fate"), to Balakirev. The composer characterized the work as "the best thing I've written so far," but Balakirev, insensitive egotist that he was, showed his appreciation by bluntly sharing his scathing appraisal of the work. He concluded his letter:

> I have written with total candor, as I am sure you won't change your mind about dedicating *Fatum* to me. It means a lot to me, as a sign of your respect for my work.

Balakirev's response must have hurt, though Tchaikovsky rarely had much faith in his own compositions anyway. In

Polonaise, from *Eugene Onegin*
***Romeo and Juliet* Overture-Fantasy**
PYOTR ILYICH TCHAIKOVSKY

Born
May 7, 1840, in Votkinsk, Russia

Died
November 6, 1893, in St. Petersburg

Works composed and premiered
The opera *Eugene Onegin* composed May 1877–January 1878; premiered March 29, 1879, in a student production of the Moscow Conservatory at the Malïy Theatre in Moscow.

The *Romeo and Juliet* Overture-Fantasy composed October 7–November 27, 1869; revised in the summer of 1870 and again in the summer of 1880 into the version performed in these concerts. This version premiered May 1, 1886, in Tiflis (Tbilisi), Mikhail Ippolitov-Ivanov conducting.

A depiction of the duel scene in Eugene Onegin *by Ilya Repin, 1899*

New York Philharmonic premieres and most recent performances
Polonaise, from *Eugene Onegin,* premiered July 16, 1901, Walter Damrosch conducting the New York Symphony (which merged with the New York Philharmonic in 1928 to form today's New York Philharmonic); most recently performed November 5, 2005, Alastair Willis, conductor.

Romeo and Juliet Overture-Fantasy premiered April 22, 1876, George Matzka, conductor; most recently performed July 22, 2006, Marin Alsop, conductor, at the Bravo! Vail Valley Music Festival in Vail, Colorado.

Estimated durations
Polonaise, from *Eugene Onegin*: ca. 5 minutes

Romeo and Juliet Overture-Fantasy: ca. 20 minutes

the event, he destroyed *Fatum*. A few months later Balakirev suggested that the 29-year-old composer write a concert overture based on Shakespeare's tragedy *Romeo and Juliet*, and he sent a long letter instructing him in detail how he should realize the project. He kibitzed about the key, the harmonic structure, and the rhythmic niceties, and he even offered a sample of what the opening measures would sound like if *he* were composing it.

Correspondence flew back and forth as Tchaikovsky worked on the piece, taking quite a lot of Balakirev's advice to heart. "The layout is *yours*," Tchaikovsky assured him. He continued:

> The introduction portraying the friar, the fight — *Allegro*, and love — the second subject; and, secondly, the modulations are yours: also the introduction in E, the *Allegro* in B-flat minor and the second subject in D-flat.

He went on with a servility that can only strike us as disturbing: "You can tear it to pieces … all you want! I will take note of what you say and will try to do better in my next work."

Of the broad melody evoking the young lovers, first stated by English horn and muted violas, Balakirev remarked:

> I imagine you are lying nude in your bath and that Artôt-Padilla herself is washing your tummy with a hot lather of scented soap.

It is true that during the preceding year Tchaikovsky had harbored a sort of professional infatuation for Désirée Artôt, a Belgian soprano who had just made a splash locally in a Shakespeare-derived role of her own — Desdemona in Rossini's *Otello*. Tchaikovsky convinced himself that he might be able to fall in love with Artôt, and decided that they should be married. His friends were aghast, and within a few months Artôt's mother (having been advised by Tchaikovsky's friend Nikolai Rubinstein, in no uncertain terms, that the composer was not husband material in the traditional sense) swept her daughter off to Warsaw, where Désirée promptly married a Spanish baritone and added the post-hyphen Padilla to her surname. In the end, this proved a great relief to Tchaikovsky. As he well knew, the real object of his affections just then was not Désirée Artôt, but rather Eduard Zak, a student at the Moscow Conservatory.

Romeo and Juliet was not a success when Rubinstein conducted its premiere, in Moscow on March 16, 1870, and that summer Tchaikovsky undertook extensive revisions. That gave rise to the beginning of the overture-fantasy as we now know it. In the summer of 1880 Tchaikovsky again put the piece through a severe rewrite; after fully a decade's work, *Romeo and Juliet* (now enriched by a dire,

Views and Reviews

A revised version of Tchaikovsky's *Romeo and Juliet*, introduced in St. Petersburg in 1872, garnered at least a sympathetic review from Mily Balakirev's crony César Cui, but the much-feared Viennese critic Eduard Hanslick expressed severe reservations when he reviewed the piece in 1876:

> In his ***Romeo and Juliet*** **Overture** steams cold glistening smoke and rages heated noise. … As an illustration of a Verona family feud, the *Allegro* sounds decidedly too Russian; one actually hears the blows of the knout falling in heavy strokes unconnected with any barlines. In St. Petersburg they probably say it more poetically: "Thus pounds Fate on the bass drum." Eight softening bars tell us unambiguously that we approach a love scene. But this motif, built on the alternation of two dissonant chords, sounds rather like scratching a glass plate with a sharp knife. The love-bliss runs down the spine like a cold snakeskin.

unforgiving coda) reached masterpiece status, an achievement that was recognized in 1884 when it won the 500-ruble Glinka Award, the first of many prizes that would come to Tchaikovsky in his remaining years.

Sergei Rachmaninoff was clearly a bundle of talent, but the early years of his career nonetheless proceeded rather by fits and starts. He was not at first a standout at the Moscow Conservatory, but by the time he graduated, in 1892, he was deemed worthy of receiving the Great Gold Medal, an honor that had previously been bestowed on only two students. In 1897, however, he was dealt a major setback with the public failure of his First Symphony, which one particularly prominent and dismissive review (by none other than César Cui) likened to "a program symphony on the 'Seven Plagues of Egypt'" that "would bring delight to the inhabitants of Hell."

The failure of that First Symphony threatened to undo Rachmaninoff, and for the next three years he didn't write a note. His talent was such that, in the psychological aftermath of this embarrassment, he simply turned to a different musical pursuit, and for the next few years focused on conducting. Before long he also sought the help of a physician who was investigating psychological therapy through hypnosis, and by 1901 Rachmaninoff was back on track as a composer. A few years later he would add the obligations of a touring concert pianist to his schedule, and his numerous recordings reveal that his outstanding reputation as a performer — refined, precise, impressive of technique, and analytical in approach — was fully merited.

Rhapsody on a Theme of Paganini for Piano and Orchestra, Op. 43

SERGEI RACHMANINOFF

Born
April 1, 1873, at Oneg, in the Novgorod region of Russia

Died
March 28, 1943, in Beverly Hills, California

Rachmaninoff

Work composed
July 3–August 18, 1934

World premiere
November 7, 1934, in Baltimore, Maryland, with Leopold Stokowski conducting The Philadelphia Orchestra and the composer as soloist

New York Philharmonic premiere
December 27, 1934, Bruno Walter, conductor, the composer as soloist; this was the work's New York premiere.

Most recent New York Philharmonic performance
November 28, 2006, Lorin Maazel, conductor, Joyce Yang, soloist

Estimated duration
ca. 24 minutes

Rachmaninoff composed four piano concertos over the course of his career (in 1890–91, 1900–01, 1909, and 1926) and was the soloist at the premiere of each. Standing as a pendant to these is a fifth work for piano and orchestra, the **Rhapsody on a Theme of Paganini**, composed during the summer of 1934 and premiered that November. The work does not pretend to be a concerto, and it will not serve any purpose to argue that it actually is one, even though it displays magnificent mastery of the dramatic balance between soloist and orchestra and, what's more, is structured in a way that evokes the three-movement form of most Romantic concertos.

The "Theme of Paganini" on which Rachmaninoff based this work was Paganini's Caprice No. 24, which that master of the violin had composed in the early 19th century, and which composers of ensuing generations — from Schumann to George Rochberg — have found unusually intriguing. It is a striking and memorable theme, and listeners will only occasionally have trouble spotting it as Rachmaninoff pokes and reshapes it through the 24 variations that make up this piece (not counting a short introduction and, at the other end, a short coda).

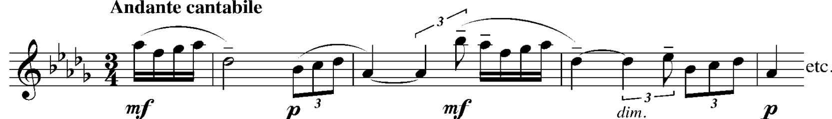
The variations of the Rhapsody are all connected without breaks, but they fall into groups that give the piece an unfailing logic and momentum as it unrolls. The first ten variations show off the piano to tremendous effect, and — in their growing sense of the demonic — seem to be playing with the legend, widely circulated in Paganini's day, that the violinist was in league with the devil. In the seventh variation Rachmaninoff accordingly

Listen for ...

The "slow movement" of the Rhapsody, which begins with Variation 12, reaches its peak with **Variation 18 (*Andante cantabile*)**, revered as the jewel in this work's crown. It is, of course, the famous moment for which everybody has been waiting. It rarely fails to satisfy, and not just because of its graceful beauty; it also provides a welcome change in variation procedure.

In the work's opening, the theme is voiced by the violins:

In the 18th variation Rachmaninoff inverts Paganini's theme, when the piano plays it upside down and much slower:



Rachmaninoff has skewed it from the work's overall key of A minor into the distant harmonic realm of D-flat major, a contrast the ear welcomes at this advanced stage of the piece. Acknowledging this section's stand-alone popularity, Rachmaninoff observed, "That one's for my manager."

introduces another borrowed theme, which plays a secondary role to Paganini's: the Dies Irae chant from the Roman Catholic Mass for the Dead. After a few variations investigate how those melodies might work together, the first section winds down in Variation 11, a sort of cadenza that serves as a transition to the second section.

On the whole this second, or middle, section (the composer referred to it as "love episodes") adheres to a slower tempo than the first, although parts of it skip along quickly all the same. After that, Rachmaninoff embarks on the last six variations, effectively his "finale," tying everything together by revisiting the Dies Irae in the final climactic pages of this justly popular masterwork.

The son of an Armenian bookbinder living in Georgia, **Aram Khachaturian** went off to Moscow in 1921, at age 18, to enter college as a biology major. At the same time he pursued private instruction in cello at the Gnesin Institute of Music, and as his musical expertise developed he transferred to the conservatory's composition department, where his teachers included Reinhold Glière and Mikhail Gnesin (whose sisters had founded the school).

Despite his late start, Khachaturian advanced quickly and zealously once he embarked on this rigorous program of musical education. At the age of 26 he gained admission to the Moscow Conservatory, where he polished his craft in the studios of such august figures as

Three Pieces from *Gayane*

ARAM KHACHATURIAN

Born
June 6, 1903, in Kidzhori, near Tbilisi, Georgia

Died
May 1, 1978, in Moscow, USSR

Khachaturian

Work composed
1941–42

World premiere
December 9, 1942, in Perm by the Kirov Ballet

New York Philharmonic premieres and most recent performances
The first time the Orchestra performed any of these selections from *Gayane* was March 12, 1949, Leopold Stokowski, conductor. The most recent performance was July 25, 2007, Bramwell Tovey, conductor, at the Bravo! Vail Valley Music Festival in Vail, Colorado.

Estimated duration
ca. 9 minutes

Nikolai Myaskovsky (composition), Sergei Vasilenko (orchestration), and Georgy Konyus (harmony). He stayed at the school for six years, completing his graduate education in 1936, the year he unveiled his very popular Piano Concerto. Even outside the Conservatory eminent figures watched his emerging talent with interest; Sergei Prokofiev, for one, was pleased to recommend Khachaturian's 1932 Clarinet Trio for performance in Paris.

In 1939, still early in his career, Khachaturian was named deputy chairman of the organizing committee of the Soviet Composers' Union. Working within an essentially conservative idiom and natively inclined toward melding folk-inspired sounds with classical traditions, Khachaturian seemed to embody the characteristics that Soviet officialdom valued in its composers. He wrote enough patriotic and propagandistic pieces to keep the commissars happy, but spent most of his time composing more serious instrumental pieces, including the Soviet Union's first film scores written specifically for sound movies.

Nonetheless, Khachaturian was not exempt when the Soviet Composers' Union came under attack from the Communist Party, and specifically from Ideological Secretary Andrei Zhdanov, in 1948. Like every other interesting composer in the Soviet Union, Khachaturian was denounced as a "formalist," and he "repented" by concentrating on overtly nationalistic pieces. Following Stalin's death, in 1953, Khachaturian went so far as to plead publicly for less restrictive state regulations on composers, a brave and unusual step at that time. In 1957 he became influential in the Composers' Union again, this time as Board Secretary, a position he held until his death. By that time Khachaturian was revered at home as a dean of Soviet musicians, decorated with such honors as the Lenin Prize (1959, for the ballet *Spartacus*) and the Hero of Socialist Labor (1973), and was one of the few composers whose renown extended beyond the Soviet bloc.

Throughout his career, Khachaturian was genuinely admired by serious colleagues. Lyudmila Polyakova's undated (1950s-ish) tract *Soviet Music* gushes about the composer:

> His full-blooded music carrying the listener along like a mighty torrent, sings beauty and the joy of life in all its manifestations, variety of color, and aspect. Asafyev … says: "Khachaturian's Rubens-like temperament, his gravitation toward the 'sensuous charms of sound texture' inherent in his music make him a herald of true hedonism that has nothing in common with the slack modern civilization, but is deeply rooted in folklore."

Khachaturian composed ***Gayane***, the second of his three full-scale ballets, in the city of Perm, to which the Kirov Opera and Ballet Theatre of Leningrad (St. Petersburg) had been evacuated during World War II. *Gayane* offers a portrait of life on a collective farm in Armenia, where people of numerous Soviet nationalities find themselves working together in the interest of Soviet victory during the Great Patriotic War. At the heart of the action is a frail Armenian woman, Gayane, whose personal spiritual strength nonetheless stands in contrast to the treachery of her husband, who will be revealed as a traitor to his country. The ethnic variety of the farm's workers provides for all manner of contrasting folk-inspired dances from the Armenian, Kurdish, Georgian, Ukrainian, and Russian traditions. The most famous number from *Gayane* is the Sabre Dance — as colorful and riotous a bit of folkloric symphonic writing as has ever been written — but Khachaturian's score, which earned its composer the Stalin Prize, fully merits occasional revisiting beyond that justly applauded number.