CONCERTO NO. 1 IN B-FLAT MINOR FOR PIANO AND ORCHESTRA, OP. 23
PIOTR ILYICH TCHAIKOVSKY
Born May 7, 1840, in Votkinsky, Russia
Died November 6, 1893, in St. Petersburg, Russia

In a letter dated October 29, 1874, Piotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky wrote, "I should like to start work on a piano concerto." By December 21, the first draft of the score was ready. On Christmas Eve 1874, Tchaikovsky played his first piano concerto for his mentor and friend, Nikolai Rubinstein. "I played the first movement. Not a word, not a remark. Oh, for one word, for friendly attack, but for God's sake (why not?) one word of sympathy. If you only knew how disappointing, how unbearable it is when a man offers his friend a dish of his work, and the other eats and remains silent." After listening to the concerto, Rubinstein told the composer it was "worthless, impossible to play, the themes have been used before; there are only two or three pages that can be salvaged, and the rest must be thrown away. ... It is vulgar, bad, hackneyed and clumsy." (The piece is fiercely difficult, and the opening theme, which occupies 110 measures, drops out of the picture and appears in the foreign key of D flat Major.) Rubinstein then proceeded to play a ridiculous version and caricature of the music.

After all of this, Tchaikovsky ran upstairs to another room. Rubinstein later followed. At this point, summoning all his fragile strength, the composer somehow managed to reply: "I will not change a single note." He then proceeded to have another nervous breakdown.

In a letter of February 1878, written in San Remo, still licking his wounds, he recalled, "I cannot convey to you the chief thing; that is, the tone in which all this was said ... a stranger happened to be in that room might have thought me a talentless thick-witted scribbler who had come to this famous musician to harass him with nonsense."

Tchaikovsky, stung by the rejection, quickly changed the concerto's dedication from Rubinstein to the conductor and pianist, Hans von Bülow. Von Bülow was delighted and felt thrilled to champion the piece. It was just the ticket for his forthcoming American tour. Its Boston premiere involved repeating the final movement on October 25, 1875. The concerto received high acclaim everywhere, and eventually Rubinstein did learn and perform the work; their friendship was also rekindled. David Bowen has noted, "The telegram sent to Tchaikovsky from von Bülow regarding the premiere was said to have been the first cable sent between Boston and Moscow."

Despite his assertion not to change a note, the concerto was revised in 1879 and again in December 1888. (Never say never!) And the composer made an arrangement for two pianos in 1874. It has become, perhaps, the most popular of Tchaikovsky's three piano concertos, and outside the concert hall, its theme became known as part of Orson Welles' Mercury Theatre Radio Program and was made into a pop song entitled "Tonight We Love" and another, "Alone at Last," made famous by the soul singer Jackie Wilson in 1960. Van Cliburn won the First International Tchaikovsky Competition in 1958 with the work. His recording of the concerto was the first classical recording to sell more than a million copies. The concerto was irresistible and still is.

The first movement appears with a majestic opening featuring four horns in unison proclaiming a four-note motif three times. Everybody lands on D flat (odd for a concerto in B-flat Minor),

and the pianist enters with a series of massive chords (changed from the first arpeggiated versions in 1889) strung across more than six octaves. These form the accompaniment of the concerto's most memorable theme coming from the strings. After the introduction fades away, the *Allegro* section denotes the concerto proper. The first theme, which follows, is based on a melody that the composer heard performed by "every blind beggar in Little Russia," noted by the composer at a market in Kamenka (near Kiev), a town frequented by the composer while visiting the estate of his sister and her husband. A second theme is placed in the woodwinds, and eventually this gains prominence. A long development is also prefaced by an extended theme, like the opening. The soloist rests for 50 measures while the orchestra flips the themes around before entering the fray with an explosive declamation in double octaves. Eventually a recapitulation focuses mainly on the second theme after genuflecting toward the first, and a massive *cadenza* closes the movement.

The second movement features a folk-like melody and a reference to the French song, "Il faut S'amuser, danser, et rire" ("One must have fun, dance, and laugh"), which the composer had heard from a French governess and which was a favorite of his younger brothers … as well as Desiree Artot, a Belgian singer and actress whom he adored (and per Michael Steinberg, was said to be the only woman he responded to sexually). His 1869 proposal to her was rebuffed. This made him crazy, and he wrote to his brother, Modest, that he would marry "whomever would have me," resulting in a calamitous marriage of a few weeks to Antonina Ivanovna Milyukova, two suicide attempts (his and hers), and her commitment to an insane asylum.

At the opening, the flute brings in the main theme, which the pianist repeats against varied backgrounds. A second melody comes from oboes and clarinets with drone-style support from the bassoons. Two solo cellos recall the main idea before a jolly center section moves into a *prestissimo*, dancing a waltz-like theme fashioned on the French song. The first ideas resurface to close the movement.

The finale, *Allegro con fuoco*, offers a brilliant dance based on a Ukrainian dance tune and a lyrical song inspired by the Ukrainian tune, "Come Come Ivanka." Rhythms are fun, and Tchaikovsky teases us with 3/4 and 6/8 rhythms, never letting us relax or become "used" to one or the other. Themes alternate and move steadily into a full statement by orchestra and piano, united now for one of the first times in the concerto. Tchaikovsky appends a fast *coda* for a thrilling close to one of the most cherished piano concertos ever written, speaking as convincingly now as then. As Heinrich Heine stated, "Where words leave off, music begins."

Jon Kimura Parker was soloist for the orchestra's last performances of Piano Concerto No. 1 in January 2008, with Thomas Wilkins conducting.