

Atlanta Symphony Orchestra

A founding member of the Robert W. Woodruff Arts Center

ROBERT SPANO, Music Director

DONALD RUNNICLES, Principal Guest Conductor

DELTA CLASSICAL SERIES CONCERTS

Thursday and Saturday, September 24 and 26, 2009, at 8 p.m.
and Sunday, September 27, 2009, at 3 p.m.

ROBERT SPANO, Conductor
GARRICK OHLSSON, Pianist

JOHN STAFFORD SMITH (1750-1836) (arr. Walter Damrosch)

The Star-Spangled Banner

PETER ILYICH TCHAIKOVSKY (1840-1893)

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

I. *Adagio; Allegro non troppo*

II. *Allegro con grazia*

III. *Allegro molto vivace*

IV. *Finale: Adagio lamentoso*

INTERMISSION

SERGEI RACHMANINOV (1873-1943)

Piano Concerto No. 3 in D minor, Opus 30 (1909)

I. *Allegro ma non tanto*

II. *Intermezzo: Adagio*

III. *Finale: Alla breve*

“INSIDE THE MUSIC” preview of the concert, Thursday at 7 p.m.,
presented by Ken Meltzer, ASO Insider and Program Annotator.

The use of cameras or recording devices during the concert is strictly prohibited.

Atlanta Symphony Orchestra

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NOTES ON THE PROGRAM

By Ken Meltzer

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.

First ASO Classical Subscription Performance: April 25, 1948, Henry Sopkin, Conductor.

Most Recent ASO Classical Subscription Performances: May 18, 19 and 20, 2006, Robert Spano, Conductor.

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 explanation 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.

In the past few decades, however, evidence has surfaced that Tchaikovsky may well have committed suicide, perhaps in order to avoid the humiliation of the revelation of an illicit relationship. (In the fourth and final volume of his superb Tchaikovsky biography (W.W. Norton and Co., 1991), David Brown argues, in extensive and cogent detail, the case for this suicide theory. Alexander Poznansky is a staunch advocate for the traditional view in his *Tchaikovsky’s Last Days* (Oxford University Press, 1996).

Throughout his life, Tchaikovsky frequently suffered from depression, and, on at least one prior occasion, attempted to kill himself. And the prevailing theory among current scholars is that Tchaikovsky’s death was indeed the result of suicide, in all likelihood, by arsenic poisoning.

“I frequently wept”

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.

Tchaikovsky originally sketched his “Pathétique” Symphony between February 16 and April 5, 1893. While on a conducting tour in London that May, Tchaikovsky wrote to Davidov: “I’m

not only suffering from a melancholy for which there is no word (there's a place in my new symphony for where I think it is well expressed), but from a hatred of strange people, and some undefined fear—and the devil knows what else besides ...”

In August, Tchaikovsky completed the orchestration of his Sixth Symphony. Shortly thereafter, the Grand Duke Konstantin suggested that Tchaikovsky compose a *Requiem*, based upon verses by the Russian poet, Alexey Apukhtin. Tchaikovsky replied: “I am in some difficulty because of the fact that my last symphony, that I have just written and is down for performance...is imbued with a spirit very close to that which infuses the *Requiem*.”

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.”

“I take more pride in it than in any other of my works”

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.”

Tchaikovsky did not live to see the vindication of his final Symphony. As previously noted, Tchaikovsky died on November 6, 1893, nine days after the work's premiere. The composer's funeral was held in St. Petersburg's Kazan Cathedral, the first time such an honor had been bestowed upon non-royalty. The normal capacity of the Cathedral was 6,000. However, 60,000 people applied for permission to attend the ceremony. 8,000 crowded into the Cathedral for the service. The funeral procession ultimately made its way to Alexander Nevsky Cemetery. Among the observers was Czar Alexander III, who was reported to have said, “We have many dukes and barons, but only one Tchaikovsky.”

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 Davıdov: "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."

Musical Analysis

I. *Adagio; Allegro non troppo* — The "Pathétique" Symphony opens with a pensive, slow introduction, featuring a solo bassoon quietly intoning a motif soon incorporated by other members of the orchestra. The motif emerges as the restless, initial theme of the principal *Allegro*, there introduced by the violins. The tension builds to a climax, as brass fanfares punctuate the central theme. The mood gradually calms, leading to an *Andante* section and the muted strings' presentation of the flowing, second theme. After a passionate restatement of that theme, there is an extended *diminuendo*, featuring a descending passage for the solo clarinet, followed by the bassoon, that fades to near silence.

Suddenly, the fragile repose is shattered by an orchestral thunderclap, inaugurating the apocalyptic development section (*Allegro vivo*). The tempest momentarily subsides, and the brass gravely intones a quotation from the Orthodox Requiem, "With thy saints, O Christ, give peace to the soul of thy servant." The development builds to yet another shattering climax, with fearsome interjections by the lower brass. Finally, the storm concludes, leading to a truncated recapitulation that focuses upon the beautiful second theme. A repetition of the clarinet solo precedes the closing measures, presenting a chorale for brass and winds, accompanied by pizzicato strings.

II. *Allegro con grazia* — Instead of the traditional slow movement, Tchaikovsky substitutes a leisurely dance. The music is in the character of a waltz; however, the composer further departs from convention by casting the movement not in 3/4, but in 5/4. This curious metric deviation imparts an air of unease — even, perhaps, of disorientation. The cellos introduce the second movement's principal melody. The flute and strings present the central section's melancholy theme. The movement concludes with a varied reprise of the opening "waltz," and a brief coda that offers echoes of the central section.

III. *Allegro molto vivace* — The third movement is a vigorous march. Over a scurrying figure, initially played by the strings, the oboes offer hints of the march tune. The jaunty march is finally introduced in complete form by the clarinets. The march returns throughout the movement, constantly gathering momentum. Violent crashes of the bass drum and cymbals reinforce two massive *fff* presentations of the central march. A stunning coda brings the movement to a robust conclusion.

IV. *Finale: Adagio lamentoso* — Of all the innovations Tchaikovsky explores in his "Pathétique" Symphony, it surely must have been the contrast between the preceding march and the finale that most disturbed the audience attending the premiere. After the thunderous closing bars of the third movement subside, the strings initiate the finale's mournful, opening theme. The horns announce the violins' presentation of a descending melody. While the melody is in D

Major, it is, nonetheless, tinged with sorrow. The melody is presented with ever-increasing urgency, culminating in a furious descending passage, capped by a *fff* explosion. A repetition of the opening theme leads to the ultimate struggle, but the sound of the tam tam (gong) signals its tragic resolution. The heartbreaking final measures slowly resolve to silence.

Piano Concerto No. 3 in D minor, Opus 30 (1909)

SERGEI RACHMANINOV was born in Semyonovo, Russia, on April 1, 1873, and died in Beverly Hills, California, on March 28, 1943. The first performance of the Third Piano Concerto took place at the New Theater in New York City on November 28, 1909, with the composer as soloist, and Walter Damrosch conducting the Symphony Society of New York. In addition to the solo piano, the Concerto is scored for two flutes, two oboes, two clarinets, two bassoons, four horns, two trumpets, three trombones, tuba, timpani, bass drum, cymbals, snare drum, suspended cymbals and strings. Approximate performance time is thirty-nine minutes.

First ASO Classical Subscription Performance: October 30, 1951, Thomas Brockman, Piano, Henry Sopkin, Conductor.

Most Recent ASO Classical Subscription Performances: April 13, 14 and 15, 2006, Yefim Bronfman, Piano, Robert Spano, Conductor.

“I’ll be able to buy myself that automobile”

In the summer of 1909, Sergei Rachmaninov received an invitation to make his first concert tour of the United States. The Russian pianist/composer/conductor had grave misgivings about leaving his family and homeland for such an extended period of time. However, considerations of a decidedly non-musical nature seemed to provide some consolation. According to biographer Oskar von Riesemann, in the early part of the 20th century, Rachmaninov developed a passion for motor cars:

While in the country he frequently made long or short expeditions ... These journeys were his greatest recreation, and never tired him; he invariably returned happy and refreshed and in the best of tempers. As he said himself, it was only when driving the car that he could get away from the musical visions which constantly pursued him.

Rachmaninov considered the generous fees he would earn during the American tour, and finally accepted. As he confessed to his friend, Nikita Morozov: “I don’t want to go. But then perhaps after America I’ll be able to buy myself that automobile ... It may not be so bad after all!”

The American concert tour featured Rachmaninov as both pianist and conductor in performances of his compositions. During the summer of 1909, he authored a new work to be premiered during that tour — his Third Piano Concerto. Rachmaninov composed the D-minor Concerto while vacationing at his retreat in Ivanovka, located some 300 miles south of Moscow. In October of that year, Rachmaninov began his voyage to the United States. The composer later recalled:

As during the previous summer I had not found much time for practicing and was not familiar enough with some passages, I took a dumb piano (i.e., silent keyboard) on the boat with me and practiced during the journey. I believe it is the only time that I have resorted to this mechanical toy, which, however, at the time proved very useful.

Rachmaninov and Mahler

On November 28, 1909, Rachmaninov appeared as soloist in the world premiere of his Third Piano Concerto, which took place at the New Theater in New York City. Walter Damrosch conducted the Symphony Society of New York. On January 16, 1910, an historic collaboration took place at Carnegie Hall, when Rachmaninov again performed his Third Piano Concerto—this time with the New York Philharmonic. The conductor was the Orchestra's Music Director, the great Austrian composer Gustav Mahler. Rachmaninov deemed Mahler:

the only conductor whom I considered worthy to be classed with (Arthur) Nikisch. He touched my composer's heart straight away by devoting himself to my Concerto until the accompaniment, which is rather complicated, had been practiced to the point of perfection, although he had already gone through another long rehearsal. According to Mahler, every detail of the score was important—an attitude which is unfortunately rare amongst conductors.

The rehearsal began at ten o'clock. I was to join it at eleven, and arrived in good time. But we did not begin to work until twelve, when there was only a half hour left, during which I did my utmost to play through a composition that usually lasts thirty-six minutes. We played and played...Half an hour was long passed, but Mahler did not pay the slightest attention to this fact...

Forty-five minutes later Mahler announced:

"Now we will repeat the first movement."

My heart froze within me. I expected a dreadful row, or at least a heated protest from the orchestra. This would certainly have happened in any other orchestra, but here I did not notice a single sign of displeasure. The musicians played the first movement with a keen or perhaps even closer appreciation than the previous time. At last we had finished. I went up to the conductor's desk, and together we examined the score. The musicians in the back seats began quietly to pack up their instruments and disappear. Mahler blew up:

"What is the meaning of this?"

The leader (i.e., concertmaster): "It is half-past one, Master."

"That makes no difference! As long as I am sitting, no musician has a right to get up!"

The talents and hard work of Rachmaninov, Mahler, and the orchestra produced a sterling performance of the new Concerto. As the *New York Herald* reported the following day:

The impression made at the earlier performances of the essential dignity and beauty of the music and the composer's playing was deepened, and the audience was quite as enthusiastic in its expression of appreciation as at the performance at The New Theater on 28 November last and at the Carnegie Hall two days later.

Then, the *New York Herald* critic offered this prophetic commentary about the Rachmaninov Third:

The work grows in impressiveness upon acquaintance and will doubtless rank among the most interesting piano concertos of recent years, although its great length and extreme difficulties bar it from performances by any but pianists of exceptional technical powers.

Fortunately, there have been many superb artists willing to tackle the phenomenal technical demands imposed by Rachmaninov, who was, after all, one of the greatest of pianists. When the hurdles are overcome, the Rachmaninov Third emerges as a summit of the Romantic piano concerto repertoire — a masterful fusion of virtuoso pyrotechnics, unforgettable melody, and lush orchestration.

Musical Analysis

I. *Allegro ma non tanto* — After two bars of orchestral introduction, the soloist enters with the undulating principal melody, scored in octaves, with each hand playing a single note. The soloist's lightning passagework serves to accompany the orchestra's restatement of the theme. A brief unaccompanied episode for the soloist leads to a broader presentation of the opening theme. Fanfares herald the second theme, soon played in its complete form by the soloist. The development section begins in much the same manner as the opening of the movement, but soon ventures into flights of stunning display for the soloist. An extended, fully-composed cadenza for the pianist also briefly incorporates the solo flute, oboe, clarinet and two horns. Instead of the traditional full recapitulation, the movement closes with a restatement of the opening melody and a brief reminiscence of the second theme.

II. *Intermezzo: Adagio* — The *Intermezzo* begins with an extended, somber orchestral introduction whose central theme — initially played by a solo oboe — bears a kinship to a portion of the principal melody of the opening *Allegro*. The soloist enters with rhapsodic variants of the theme. A contrasting, vivacious *scherzando* passage features yet another transformation of the opening movement's principal melody, now played by a solo clarinet and bassoon. After a brief reprise of the opening portion of the *Intermezzo*, the soloist launches a dramatic passage. This serves as the bridge to the *Finale*, which follows without pause.

III. *Finale: Alla breve* — The soloist presents the fanfare-like opening theme, derived from the introductory measures of the first movement. A series of syncopated chords by the soloist develops into the flowing second theme. Two subsequent episodes — a breezy *Scherzando* and more reflective *Lento* — present echoes of the opening *Allegro*. A varied reprise of the *Finale*'s first section leads to the grand resolution of the Concerto — a glorious declaration of the second theme, capped by a dazzling cascade by the soloist.