

TCHAIKOVSKY'S FIRST PIANO CONCERTO

21 – 23 AUGUST 2026

Concert Hall,
Sydney Opera House



“SYDNEY”
“SYMPHONY”
“ORCHESTRA”

Emirates

Principal Partner

SYDNEY SYMPHONY ORCHESTRA

PATRON Her Excellency The Honourable Margaret Beazley AC KC

Founded in 1932 by the Australian Broadcasting Commission, the Sydney Symphony Orchestra has evolved into one of the world's finest orchestras as Sydney has become one of the world's great cities. Resident at the iconic Sydney Opera House, the Sydney Symphony Orchestra also performs in venues throughout Sydney and regional New South Wales, and international tours to Europe, Asia and the USA have earned the Orchestra worldwide recognition for artistic excellence.

The Sydney Symphony Orchestra's concerts encompass masterpieces from the classical repertoire, music by some of the finest living composers, and collaborations with guest artists from all genres, reflecting the Orchestra's versatility and diverse appeal. Its award-winning education program is central to its commitment to the future of live symphonic music, and the Orchestra promotes the work of Australian composers through performances, recordings and its commissioning program.

The Orchestra's first chief conductor was Sir Eugene Goossens, appointed in 1947; he was followed by Nicolai Malko, Dean Dixon, Moshe Atzmon, Willem van Otterloo, Louis Frémaux, Sir Charles Mackerras, Zdeněk Mácal, Stuart Challender, Edo de Waart and Gianluigi Gelmetti. Vladimir Ashkenazy was Principal Conductor from 2009 to 2013, followed by David Robertson as Chief Conductor from 2014 to 2019. Australian-born Simone Young commenced her role as Chief Conductor in 2022, a year in which the Orchestra made its return to a renewed Sydney Opera House Concert Hall.

WHAT TO EXPECT IN THIS CONCERT

Expect to enjoy yourself! Maybe your heart will beat a little faster. Maybe your hair will stand on end. It's hard to predict or describe how the vast sound of a symphony orchestra will affect each of us. Just bring an open mind and engage with the music – close your eyes, watch the conductor and the musicians, or just sit back and let the music take you away.



When do I clap?

Good question. Most pieces of music are broken up into different movements – usually, people only clap at the end of a piece, so there will be silent pauses between movements. On the next page you will see how many movements the pieces in this concert have, and the duration of each piece. But the simplest thing is to wait until the conductor turns around – or when everyone else starts applauding.

The conductor may leave the stage and come back on a few times, and acknowledge the different sections of the orchestra. You can keep clapping as long as you want to – and feel free to cheer and stomp your feet if you really enjoy the concert!



Can I take photos or videos?

You can take photos and videos on your phone during the applause at the end of a piece of music. **Please switch your phone to silent, make sure the flash is off and dim the brightness of your screen so you don't distract other audience members.** And if you share it to your socials, tag us in your posts! We love seeing what people have captured.

Please leave professional and semi-professional camera gear at home and limit yourself to a phone camera inside the venue.



What happens at interval?

The interval will begin when the conductor leaves the stage and the lights go to their full brightness. You can choose to stay in your seat and wait, go to the bathroom, walk around or purchase food or drink from one of the foyer bars.

An announcement will play through the speaker system 10 minutes, 5 minutes and 1 minute before the concert resumes.

2026 CONCERT SEASON

TCHAIKOVSKY'S FIRST PIANO CONCERTO

WITH YEOL EUM SON

NICOLAS ELLIS conductor

FRIDAY

PYOTR ILYICH TCHAIKOVSKY (1840–1893)
Piano Concerto No.1 in B-flat minor, Op.23 (1874–75)

- i. Allegro non troppo e molto maestoso
- ii. Andantino semplice
- iii. Allegro con fuoco

YEOL EUM SON piano

DMITRI SHOSTAKOVICH (1906–1975)
Symphony No.1 in F minor, Op.10 (1924–1925)

- i. Allegretto
 - ii. Allegro
 - iii. Lento
 - iv. Allegro molto
-

SATURDAY & SUNDAY

JUSTIN WILLIAMS (born 1980)
Symphony No.1 (2023)
*Jointly commissioned by Queensland Symphony Orchestra
and Sydney Symphony Orchestra*

PYOTR ILYICH TCHAIKOVSKY (1840–1893)
Piano Concerto No.1 in B flat minor, Op.23 (1874–75)

- i. Allegro non troppo e molto maestoso
- ii. Andantino semplice
- iii. Allegro con fuoco

YEOL EUM SON piano

INTERVAL

DMITRI SHOSTAKOVICH (1906–1975)
Symphony No.1 in F minor, Op.10 (1924–1925)

- i. Allegretto
- ii. Allegro
- iii. Lento
- iv. Allegro molto

Friday 21 August, 11am
Tea & Symphony
Saturday 22 August, 7pm
Symphonic Saturday
Sunday 23 August, 2pm
Sunday Afternoon Symphony

Concert Hall,
Sydney Opera House

Pre-concert talk
By Lily Bryant in the Northern
Foyer at 6.15pm (Saturday)
and on the Lounge Level at
1.15pm (Sunday)

Estimated durations (Friday)
Tchaikovsky – 35 minutes
Shostakovich – 30 minutes

**Estimated durations
(Saturday & Sunday)**
Williams – 25 minutes
Tchaikovsky – 35 minutes
Interval – 20 minutes
Shostakovich – 30 minutes

ABC Classic
Sunday's performance will
be recorded for broadcast
on 21 September, and
streaming online.

Cover image
Yeol Eum Son.

These performances have
been generously supported by
Paolo Hooke and Fan Guo.

We acknowledge the Gadigal people of the Eora
Nation, the traditional custodians of the land and
water on which we work and perform. We pay
our respects to their Elders past and present.

Emirates
Principal Partner

YOUR CONCERT AT A GLANCE

JUSTIN WILLIAMS (born 1980)
Symphony No.1 (2023)*

**Saturday and Sunday only*

Co-commissioned by the Queensland and Sydney Symphony Orchestras, Justin Williams's Symphony is a wide-ranging work in four movements that reflect his deep knowledge of the symphonic tradition, and the endless range of sound and colour that an orchestra can make.

It was completed in 2023, a year that saw India surpass China as the world's most populous country, the Screen Actors Guild strike and the FIFA Women's World Cup in Australia and New Zealand.

Contemporary music included Anne Cawrse's marimba concerto *Dare to Declare*, Elena Kats-Chernin's Violin Concerto and Georges Lentz's violin concerto *...to beam in distant heavens...*



Justin Williams

PYOTR ILYICH TCHAIKOVSKY (1840–1893)
Piano Concerto No.1 in B flat minor, Op.23 (1874–75)

The first of Tchaikovsky's piano concertos is one of the most celebrated works in the orchestral repertoire, with a long and heroic first movement, a characteristically melody-heavy slow movement, and a finale that thrillingly pits two blocks of material against each other.

It premiered in Boston in 1875, the year that saw the foundation of the Theosophical Society in New York, Birmingham City Football Club in the UK and the gallery that would become the Art Gallery of NSW.

Contemporary music included Johannes Brahms's String Quartet No.3, Edvard Grieg's music for *Peer Gynt*, and Georges Bizet's *Carmen*.



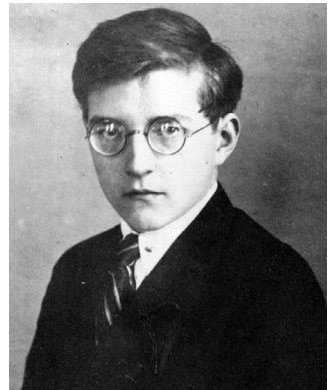
A portrait of Tchaikovsky c.1875.
by Michail Michailovich Panov (1836–1894). Source: Tchaikovsky Memorial Museum, Klin.

DMITRI SHOSTAKOVICH (1906–1975)
Symphony No.1 in F minor, Op.10 (1924–1925)

Written for Shostakovich's graduation, the symphony was not only an immediate hit in Leningrad, but was soon made popular in the West by conductor Bruno Walter. It uses the traditional four movement design and shows a brilliant young composer pushing at the limits of his technique.

It premiered in 1926, the year that saw the League of Nations abolish slavery, Lebanon become a republic and the foundation of Australia's Council for Scientific and Industrial Research.

Contemporary music included Edgar Varèse's *Amériques*, Sibelius's *Tapiola* and Béla Bartók's *The Miraculous Mandarin*.



Shostakovich in 1925. Source unknown/
Wikimedia Commons.

ABOUT THE ARTISTS

NICOLAS ELLIS conductor

Nicolas Ellis is Music Director of the Orchestre National de Bretagne, Principal Guest of Les Violons du Roy and Artistic Director of Orchestre de l'Agora, which he founded in Montreal in 2013.

The 2025/26 season sees Nicolas debut with the Polish National Radio Symphony Orchestra, Norwegian Radio Orchestra, Swedish Chamber Orchestra, Hamburger Symphoniker, the Orchestra of the Opéra National de Lorraine and the Baltimore and Seattle Symphony Orchestras; he returns for subscription concerts with the Sydney Symphony Orchestra.

Highlights of the previous season include performances with the Tampere and Luxembourg Philharmonics, San Diego Symphony, the Orchestra of St. Luke's and with the Orchestre Métropolitain, with whom he is a regular favourite.

Now in his second season as Music Director of the Orchestre National de Bretagne, together they'll perform works together by Mozart, Brahms and Schumann, to Stravinsky, Bartok and Shostakovich; a program centred around Mendelssohn's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, collaborating with a local Youth Theatre; and an evening of folk music, featuring traditional folk musicians from Québec.

Acclaimed for his approach to the baroque and classical repertoire, his recent performance of Mozart Symphony No.25 with Les Violons du Roy was described by *Le Devoir* as 'one of the most beautiful Mozart symphonies heard in Montreal in the last 20 years'.

At the Opéra de Montréal, Nicolas has led productions of *Le nozze di Figaro*, *The Turn of the Screw*, *Poppea* and *L'enfant et les sortilèges*. Elsewhere, he conducted *Die Fledermaus* at Opéra de Québec, Britten's *War Requiem* at Graz Opera and a new production of *Die Zauberföte* at Opéra de Rennes.



Photo by Kevin Calixte

ABOUT THE ARTISTS

YEOL EUM SON piano

Poetic elegance, an innate feeling for expressive nuance and the power to project bold, dramatic contrasts are among the arresting attributes of Yeol Eum Son's pianism.

She is highly sought-after on the international scene, praised for her refined artistry, breathtaking technical control, and a strikingly wide-ranging repertoire that spans from Bach and Mozart to Ligeti and Kapustin. In high demand around the world as a recitalist, concerto soloist and chamber musician, she has built a strong reputation through frequent collaborations with many of today's leading conductors, including Sakari Oramo, Antonio Pappano, Roberto González-Monjas, Ryan Bancroft, Maxim Emelyanychev, Edward Gardner, Jaime Martín, Andrew Manze, James Gaffigan, Andrej Boreyko, Jun Märkl, Alexander Shelley, Lio Kuokman, Pietari Inkinen, Jonathon Heyward, Joana Carneiro and Anja Bihlmaier. This season, she looks forward to forging new collaborations with Joshua Weilerstein and Thomas Søndergård.

Highlights of the 2025/26 season included debut collaborations with the Danish National, Swedish Radio, London Philharmonic and São Paulo State Symphony, as well as her New York orchestral debut with the Festival Orchestra of Lincoln Center as part of *Summer for the City*. In the UK, return engagements featured collaborations with the Scottish Chamber and the BBC Symphony – the latter encompassing performances both at the London's Barbican Centre and on tour in South Korea – while Asian highlights included a return to the Singapore Symphony Orchestra. In the summer '26, she returns to the BBC Proms for her second festival appearance, performing Gershwin's Piano Concerto with James Gaffigan and the BBC Symphony Orchestra.

During the 2026/27 season, Yeol Eum maintains a strong European presence through a series of distinguished debuts and high-profile returns. In the UK, she returns to London for two recitals at Wigmore Hall and appears at the Barbican with the BBC Symphony Orchestra, alongside a return engagement with the Bournemouth Symphony Orchestra. On the continent, she makes her debut with the Gulbenkian Orchestra in Lisbon, play-directs

the Irish Chamber Orchestra and returns to Amsterdam's Concertgebouw for her debut with the Netherlands Radio Philharmonic Orchestra. She also revisits Amare Concert Hall in The Hague for another collaboration with the Residentie Orkest, following her successful tenure there as Artist-in-Residence during the 2022/23 season.

In the United States, where her profile continues its rapid ascent, Yeol Eum focuses predominantly on the music of Beethoven during the 2026/27 season, marking the bicentenary of the composer's death. A highlight is an ambitious project with the Baltimore Symphony Orchestra, performing all of Beethoven's Piano Concertos within a single week. She also makes her highly anticipated debut at Carnegie Hall's Stern Auditorium with the Orchestra of St. Luke's under the direction of Andrew Manze, performing Beethoven's Piano Concerto No.3, and returns to the St. Louis Symphony Orchestra with Piano Concerto No.1. Additional engagements in the US include a debut with the Minnesota Philharmonic, as well as a series of recitals across both the West and East Coasts, further strengthening her presence nationwide.

In Asia, she returns to the Singapore International Piano Festival with an all-Beethoven recital program.



ABOUT THE MUSIC

ABOUT JUSTIN WILLIAMS

Justin Williams holds the position of Assistant Principal Viola with the Sydney Symphony Orchestra and was the founding violist of the Tinalley String Quartet (TSQ). He has performed as Principal Viola with the Melbourne, Sydney and Queensland symphony orchestras, Australian World Orchestra, Australian Opera and Ballet Orchestra (AOBO), Melbourne Chamber Orchestra and Australia ProArte, and as ripieno viola with Australian Chamber Orchestra.

As a member of Tinalley String Quartet, Justin shared in the experience of winning the Ninth Banff International String Quartet Competition and the 2005 Australian Chamber Music Competition. With TSQ he has toured extensively throughout Australia, Europe and North America performing in major concert halls such as Vienna's Musikverein and Amsterdam's Concertgebouw and has released several recordings with Move Records, Decca Australia and ABC Classic.

As a composer, Justin released his *Movement for String Quartet* in 2020, which has since been performed throughout Australia and in Europe by the Australian String Quartet, and in Japan by Australia's award winning Affinity Quartet. In 2022, Justin was the recipient of a Sydney International Piano Competition *Composing the Future* juror's prize for his 'Three Intermezzi' for solo piano. In 2023, his set of songs *Three Pieces for String Quartet and Voice: Love – Despair – Hope*, was commissioned and premiered at Blackheath Chamber Music Festival, and his First Symphony was jointly commissioned by Queensland Symphony Orchestra and Sydney Symphony Orchestra and premiered by QSO under the direction of Maestro Umberto Clerici as part of the Brisbane Festival. His Symphony has since been performed by Sydney Youth Orchestra and will be performed by Sydney Symphony Orchestra in August 2026. In 2024, Justin added to his oeuvre a duo for violin and cello (*Theme and Variations*), and a piece for solo piano, *A Storm*, commissioned by the Australian National Academy of Music as part of ANAM Set 2024. In 2025, Justin completed a work for wind quintet which was performed by musicians of the Sydney

Symphony in the Orchestra's *Cocktail Hour* chamber music series at the Sydney Opera House, and he was commissioned by Hymie and Darina Factor to write a string quartet, which he is currently working on. Justin has also been commissioned by the Sydney Symphony and Principal Cor Anglais, Alexandre Oguey, to write a work for cor anglais, violin, viola, cello and double bass, which is to be premiered in 2027.



ABOUT WILLIAMS'S FIRST SYMPHONY

The composer writes:

Completed in 2023, this symphony is texturally rich and thematically driven.

The first movement is short and compact and introduces important thematic material for the development of the symphony. The opening theme expresses the fast nature of passing time, during which moments for pause and contemplation are extracted. This is communicated in the first bar by a sharp and heavy *forte* gesture from the strings and woodwinds immediately dropping to a briefly suspended *pianissimo*, which stretches the value of the fast-moving bar, marked *Allegro*. The second bar scurries forward, and in contrast bar three presents a moment of quiet reflection, represented by a major seventh leading back to the tonic, played by a solo violin. This struggle of movement within time

ABOUT THE MUSIC

is explored throughout the first movement and features prominently in the third. The first movement features three themes, all of which return throughout the Symphony.

The second movement begins as a march. In the key of D flat major, the strings provide the rhythmic platform in support of generous brass sonorities followed closely by the first theme, which is presented by the oboe and passed over to the trumpet. Carried forward by the winds and aided by the strings, the second theme is presented in a suddenly changed atmosphere in A flat minor. Here the strings take over the thematic material against a more lyrical application of the march rhythm played by the winds. The trumpets take hold of the rhythmic element of the second theme which is pitted against a melodic element of the first theme presented by the woodwinds, and with the help of the snare drum and lush textural support from the strings, the true nature of a march is embraced. The development begins in A flat major with a sweetly lyrical application of the first theme; its root springing from the second theme of the first movement which here is played by the strings and passed to the winds for further development in E flat minor, featuring the cor anglais. Back in the recapitulation the themes are presented in close succession and at times, concurrently in both their original and developed forms. The movement concludes in an elated, almost fanfare-like fashion.

The third movement is a slow lament, opening with the sound of a solo bassoon melting into a languid oboe line and passing over to the cor anglais, which plays the main theme. As with the opening theme of the first movement, this lamenting theme in C minor once again explores the passage of time with forward progression momentarily suspended, as heard with the introduction of the harp against a quietly sustained chord. In ternary form, the movement's moments of reflection are further expressed in the middle section via a defined tone played by the first violins, violas, cellos and crotales against a new theme presented by the bassoon. The opening theme returns in a broad and full orchestral setting, dramatically interrupted by dreamlike pauses, expressed by the woodwinds and the harp.

The final movement is a fast and virtuosic movement with a structure resembling sonata form, composed in the relative major key of G minor: B flat major. It was composed with the intention of making it fun for the musicians. The first theme is built on a trill, which forms the foundation of textural accompaniment at the beginning of the development as the trill is slowed to a softly flowing quaver line, and which becomes more closely connected to its original state as the development progresses in a frenetic semitone passage of semiquavers. A bridge passage between the development and the recapitulation is built on the third theme of the first movement and serves the function of leading the listener back to the very opening theme via familiar material. This time the theme is presented in E flat minor and possesses a feeling of resignation. The movement closes on an uplifting note, back in the home key of B flat Major.

Having played the viola in the Sydney Symphony Orchestra for fourteen years, it was the sound and personalities of the Sydney Symphony Orchestra that were at the forefront of my mind when writing this work.

Justin Williams © 2026

Justin Williams's First Symphony is scored for 2 flutes, 2 oboes (2nd doubling cor anglais), 2 clarinets and 3 bassoons (3rd doubling contrabassoon); 4 horns, 2 trumpets and 3 trombones; timpani, percussion, harp and strings.

It was jointly commissioned by the Queensland and Sydney symphony orchestras, and received its world premiere in September 2023, performed by the QSO with Umberto Clerici conducting.

This is its Sydney Symphony Orchestra premiere.

ABOUT THE MUSIC

ABOUT TCHAIKOVSKY

Tchaikovsky was born in Votkinsk, in the Urals, where his father was a mining engineer. His musical education began with the orchestrion, a mechanical contraption that played popular operatic excerpts. He also began piano lessons in 1845. The family moved to St Petersburg in 1852, where Tchaikovsky attended the School of Jurisprudence. On graduating in 1859 he was employed at the Ministry of Justice, but attended classes run by the Russian Musical Society. Under the leadership of Anton Rubinstein, the Society founded the St Petersburg Conservatory in 1862, and Tchaikovsky enrolled in its first class, with Rubinstein as his composition teacher. After three years there, Tchaikovsky was invited by Rubinstein's equally illustrious brother, Nikolai, to teach harmony for the Moscow branch of the Russian Musical Society, which would soon become the Moscow Conservatory.

Around 1868 he became, briefly, quite friendly with the group of composers known as the Kuchka ('The Five' or 'Mighty Handful'), led by Mily Balakirev. Balakirev believed that Russian composers should create distinctly Russian music, unpolluted by the techniques of Western composition. But although Tchaikovsky had used some traditional melodies, he was an internationalist at heart, and by 1877 he had broken with the Five.

In 1876 Tchaikovsky had received a letter from a woman, Nadezhda von Meck, who was a huge fan, but expressly did not want to – and never did – meet Tchaikovsky. She did, however, want to use some of the considerable wealth her railway-tycoon husband had left her to commission new music, and for 14 years supported Tchaikovsky so that he could give up teaching and concentrate on composition. He and Meck corresponded frequently, offering us an insight into Tchaikovsky's aesthetics and methods.

As symphonist, and great composer for ballet, Tchaikovsky was fêted as far afield as the United States and Britain. In November 1893, days after conducting the premiere of his Sixth Symphony in St Petersburg, he became ill and was treated for cholera which was epidemic in the city. The treatment was successful, but Tchaikovsky died of complications.



A portrait of Tchaikovsky c.1875, by Michail Michailovich Panov (1836–1894). Source: Tchaikovsky Memorial Museum, Klin.

ABOUT TCHAIKOVSKY'S FIRST PIANO CONCERTO

Gordon Kalton Williams writes:

After completing the opera *Vakula the Smith* in September 1874, Tchaikovsky had reason to be optimistic. His First Symphony was soon to be printed, there was interest in the forthcoming performance of *The Tempest*, and by the end of the year, his two quartets were to be performed at Russian Musical Society concerts in St Petersburg. It is not clear why he decided that his next major work would be a piano concerto. He had previously confessed to disliking the combination of piano and orchestra. But after telling his brother Modest in November that he had turned his attention to a piano concerto, he finished the work in seven weeks, fired by the dramatic possibilities of the confrontation between heroic soloist and eloquent orchestra.

In January 1875, Tchaikovsky showed the completed work to Nikolai Rubinstein, whose response was devastating. It is difficult to be sure, however, that Rubinstein's criticism was quite as drastic as Tchaikovsky made out. Rubinstein conducted the Moscow premiere with Sergei Taneyev at the piano. By 1878, he had become one of the work's most persuasive advocates.

Perhaps Rubinstein was puzzled by the work's unusual structure. The second and third movements are both fairly straightforward.

ABOUT THE MUSIC

The second, a simple ternary-form movement, really requires little more than a simple flow of melody such as Tchaikovsky was uniquely able to supply. In the third movement Tchaikovsky alternates two blocks of thematic material.

But it is the first movement which is most interesting from a structural point of view. The sinuous weaving theme introduced by the strings has become one of the best-loved melodies in the classical music repertoire. But it never reappears. Why? Because Tchaikovsky the melodist doesn't have enough structural sense? Or because Tchaikovsky the *great* melodist knows that the high charge of this melody will keep it memorable for the duration of the work? Or...something else?

That Tchaikovsky originally intended this introduction to be a slow one in the manner of a Haydn symphony is indicated by the original tempo indication *Andante non troppo e molto maestoso*. But Brown points out that the apparently self-contained nature of this introduction is deceptive: this melody has implications for the rest of the movement.

The main body of the movement is introduced by the piano in fast two-note groups. Tchaikovsky avoids thematic development by dovetailing the sighing second subject directly into the end of this principal material. Muted strings then introduce the second part of the second subject, and it is the muted string theme which begins the development section, the winds adding the two-note skipping material of the first subject, until the muted string theme is pumped out forcefully by brass. Tchaikovsky fulfils the demands of sonata form by *character* transformation, not thematic transformation.

In the recapitulation, quick doubled notes in the piano signal the return of the main material. The sighing second subject appears in turn as the doubled notes of the first subject fragment and grumble away in the bass of the piano. But then, instead of the muted string theme, Tchaikovsky interpolates the high drama of a cadenza. Only after this does the muted string theme reappear and bring the movement to its conclusion.

Brown believes that 'the frankness and force with which Tchaikovsky declared himself in this work' have embarrassed many critics, and 'deafened many to its finer qualities', not least of which is the composer's bold answer to the questions of organic growth in the first movement. Too many have assumed that Tchaikovsky's emotional candour and melodic strengths obscured structural weaknesses.

Perhaps the question for an audience member, however, is simply this: do you miss not hearing the bold opening theme again? Or, at work's end, particularly with Tchaikovsky providing you with yet another wonderful melody (the second subject of the finale), do you think you would have criticised the work as scathingly as Rubinstein is alleged to have done?

Notes by Gordon Kalton Williams/Symphony Australia © 1999/2002.

Tchaikovsky's First Piano Concerto is scored for pairs of flutes, oboes, clarinets and bassoons; 4 horns, 2 trumpets and 3 tubas; timpani, strings and piano soloist.

It was first performed on October 25, 1875, by Hans von Bülow with the Boston Symphony Orchestra, conducted by Benjamin Johnson Lang.

The Sydney Symphony Orchestra first performed it in June 1938, with Allen McCristal conducted by Georg Szell.

Other notable performances include those given by Isador Goodman conducted by Eugene Goossens (1949); Walter Gieseking/Goossens (1952); Julius Katchen/Charles Mackerras (1963); Larry Sitsky/Moshe Atzmon (1970 Regional Tour); John Ogdon/Dean Dixon (1975); Jorge Bolet/David Zinman (1977); Roger Woodward/Stuart Challender (1988 Symphony Under the Stars); Earl Wild/Jiří Stárek (1988); Lang Lang/Christopher Seaman (2004); Louis Lortie/Gianluigi Gelmetti (2007); Yefim Bronfman/David Robertson (2008); Lang Lang/Jahja Ling (2011); Joyce Yang/Charles Olivieri-Munroe (2013) and Behzod Abduraimov/Lionel Bringuier (2019).

Our most recent performances were in November 2023, with Alexander Gavrylyuk conducted by Sir Donald Runnicles. This concert is available to stream for free on our website.

IS TCHAIKOVSKY AS POPULAR AS EVER?

Tchaikovsky is best-known for his big tunes – many of which you will hear in his First Piano Concerto. But as David Garrett argues, reducing him to a mere melodist does him, and us, a disservice.

By Alastair McKean

Eleven-year-old Igor Stravinsky announced one day in an awe-struck voice to his school class in St Petersburg, 'Tchaikovsky has died.' Instead of the expected response, one boy said, 'What class was he in?' Stravinsky's father was a singer at the Mariinsky Opera Theatre, and had pointed out the great composer to his musical son. The child was father to the man: Igor Stravinsky, to the annoyance of some of his modernist admirers, was to remain a lifelong lover of the music of Tchaikovsky, and paid a special tribute to it in his 1928 ballet *The Fairy's Kiss*.

Few would quarrel with the assertion that Tchaikovsky was the greatest Russian composer of the 19th century, Stravinsky of the 20th. But if we took a popularity poll with the general concert-going public, we would get a rather different answer. As the Cold War recedes into memory, recall one of its most symbolic episodes: amidst the shock of the first Sputnik and the beginning of the space race, a young American, Van Cliburn, won the Tchaikovsky competition in Moscow, and soon his recording of the piano concerto, Tchaikovsky's B flat minor, topped the classical best-seller lists everywhere. We suspect that the Russians, even under Communism, were pleased with the West's love-affair with their great composer. Soon afterwards, an early thaw in the Cold War brought the triumphant return to Russia of Igor Stravinsky, long ago lost in embrace with the capitalist United States. But Stravinsky still sells fewer tickets than Tchaikovsky.

Maybe musical Russians found our Tchaikovsky mania rather selective. The First Piano concerto, the Violin Concerto, the last three symphonies, *Romeo and Juliet*, the *1812* Overture, and the *Marche Slave* – orchestral works all, and they regularly filled concert halls. Generations of balletomanes learnt to regard *Swan Lake*, *The Sleeping Beauty*, and *The Nutcracker* as the apogee of 'classical' ballet, and Tchaikovsky as ballet's greatest composer.

Stravinsky, on the other hand, like most Russians, knew a Tchaikovsky with words. He encountered him in the opera house, above all in *Eugene Onegin* and *The Queen of Spades*, stories based on Pushkin, the writer who gave words and form to the experience of generations of educated Russians. Non-Russians may have sensed from the symphonies that Tchaikovsky identified with lovesick youth and fate-ridden losers. Russian opera-goers had encountered them personified in his heroine Tatiana, and hero Hermann. Tchaikovsky setting Russian poetry as song, making music for the Orthodox liturgy – this is a more rounded Tchaikovsky than most Westerners know.

A visiting conductor once shocked many hearers in Australia by admitting that he didn't like Mozart's music. These days this is borderline scandalous, just as it used to be (perhaps still is) to criticise Beethoven. Tchaikovsky has been fair game to the critics. His own well-documented self-doubts give the cue. It's all too easy to write about shortcomings in form of the symphonies about which Tchaikovsky himself voiced such anxieties. Critics these days tend to oscillate between two self-repelling poles. Towards new music they often act as advocates, or are afraid to be too dismissive, lest they be wrong. Towards the music of the past they often behave as keepers of the seal, guardians of the great tradition. How useful to find a composer about whom the public, who love him so annoyingly, can be corrected! If Tchaikovsky doesn't get the seal of critical approval, perhaps his music will eventually go away, to be replaced by other things – whether newer things or composers the perverse public has never learnt to like!

When you get right down to it, what most endears Tchaikovsky to the public is tunes – melodies memorable in themselves, surviving

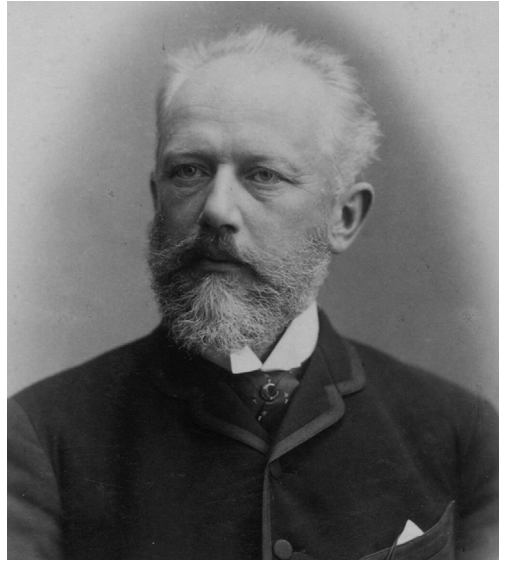
FEATURE ARTICLE

even translation into pop songs, and often memorably associated with a particular instrument's sound. Above all, these tunes are brimming with sentiment, and speak to many listeners of a sensibility with which they can identify, in some moods. Tchaikovsky's expression leans on the side of self-pity. This, no doubt, is what repels the severe-minded, including the critics.

There are those in our time, resistant perhaps to the more emotional side of Tchaikovsky, who have loved him selectively for some of the same 'purely musical' qualities which are admired in Mozart: seeming ease of melodic and harmonic invention; the deft suiting of ideas to instrumental possibilities. Such admirers of Tchaikovsky will love best the ballets, large stretches of the operas, and individual movements of the symphonies (usually the most dance-like). They will feel that Tchaikovsky is at his least self-conscious when dealing with a dramatic subject, or following a choreography; even merely providing supreme light music, as in the *Serenade for Strings*. This is the Tchaikovsky, some will say, best able to express his wonderful musical gifts.

But this is to try to turn Tchaikovsky into a classicist (as, we suspect, Stravinsky did). He is not a classicist manqué. In assessing Russian creative artists, in any case, rather than lining them up on either side of a Classical/Romantic divide, it may be more useful to see other distinctions. The Moscow-based Tchaikovsky and the St Petersburg-based 'nationalists' – the Mighty Five and their school – were inheritors, sometimes uncritical, of the musical language and form of mid-19th-century Romantic music. But both 'schools' were pouring new wine into the old bottles.

The nationalists at their best made two great contributions to music. One is the re-discovery of a vein of representative, illustrative music, putting colour, gesture and melodic inflection at the service of story-telling and scene-painting with the vividness of Russian picture story books (Stravinsky's *Firebird* and Ravel's *Daphnis* are unthinkable without Rimsky-Korsakov). The other, even more remarkable contribution is to see human life through music without evasion and varnish: the truthfulness of Mussorgsky's *Boris Godunov* and Nursery Songs (with its heirs in Debussy and Shostakovich, its parallel in Janáček).



1888 portrait of Tchaikovsky attributed to Émile Reutlinger (1825–1907). Source: New York Public Library Digital Gallery — Image ID: 1158492.

This is the Russian music intellectuals get excited about. Yet Tchaikovsky is more often played, and more deeply loved. Of course, he is the romantic; Mozart was his musical hero, but Mozart can bring completely different characters to life in music, whereas Tchaikovsky's Tatiana, Lensky, and Hermann are all aspects of his own personality. But Tchaikovsky is also the most complete musician of his country in his century. His westward-looking curiosity enabled him to absorb the expressive detail and the new forms of Schumann's piano music and songs, the elegant orchestral gesture of Delibes' ballets, the passion and colour of Bizet's *Carmen*, the al fresco tunefulness of Italian popular song.

Tchaikovsky brought these all home to Russia, in every sense. That he reflected the sensibility of the Westward-looking Russian educated classes helps explain his appeal to his countrymen. The freshness and personal quality of his musical synthesis explain his appeal to everybody. In his Fourth, Fifth and Sixth symphonies, Tchaikovsky was able to externalise his subjectivity in memorable music, strongly and originally enough constructed to stand the test of (admittedly excessive) repetition. Among true music lovers, Tchaikovsky is as popular as ever.

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ABOUT THE MUSIC

ABOUT SHOSTAKOVICH

Shostakovich was an adolescent at the time of the 1917 revolution. Unlike his near contemporary Prokofiev, or the slightly older Stravinsky, Shostakovich saw no need to travel abroad, let alone emigrate. The 21 year-old composer's First Symphony premiered in his home town of Leningrad (St Petersburg) in 1928; its introduction to the West by Bruno Walter assured Shostakovich of world celebrity, but was also an announcement of the optimistic, outward looking Russia of the immediate post-Revolutionary period. That Shostakovich was broadly in sympathy with the ideals of early revolutionary Russia is suggested by his Second and Third Symphonies, subtitled 'To October' and 'The First of May' respectively. It should be noted, however, that these works pre-date the official promulgation of the concept of 'socialist realism'; in them, Shostakovich displays an exuberant interest in the techniques of Western art music, such as dissonance and irony.

The political backdrop to Shostakovich's early career was the power struggle between Trotsky and Stalin that began with the death of Lenin in 1922. By the early thirties the ascendancy of Stalin was complete and in 1934 the purges, or Great Terror, began. Within that period (1934-38) were two particularly bloody years where N. I. Yezhov, chief of the NKVD (later the KGB) oversaw the imprisonment and murder of Stalin's principal remaining Party rivals as well as leading scientists, writers and musicians. The effect of the purges was to rob the USSR of millions of its citizens, especially leading figures in most fields, so that by the end of the 1930s the country's intellectual infrastructure was almost fatally weakened.



Shostakovich in 1925. Source unknown/Wikimedia Commons.

Despite having enjoyed a spectacularly successful two year run, Shostakovich's opera *Lady Macbeth of Mtsensk*, was attacked in the pages of *Pravda* in 1936 as 'chaos instead of music' and its composer warned that 'this could all end very badly'. Shostakovich, or the orchestral management in Leningrad, immediately withdrew his demanding Fourth Symphony, a powerfully disturbing behemoth of dissonance and irony. The composer, like many of his generation, is said to have slept for a time in the hallway of his apartment so that the seemingly inevitable arrest wouldn't traumatise his young family. (Shostakovich suffered several reversals of fortune: he was denounced in 1936, rehabilitated with the premiere of the Fifth Symphony, denounced again in 1948, despite having been awarded the Stalin Prize in 1940 and the Order of Lenin in 1946.)

ABOUT THE MUSIC

ABOUT SHOSTAKOVICH'S FIRST SYMPHONY

Carl Rosman writes:

Shostakovich's First Symphony began life as a Conservatoire graduation piece; it can fairly be said that few university composition portfolios take on a life of their own as decisively as this work. Within a few years it had found itself an international publisher, and had been conducted not only by Nikolai Malko (who gave its premiere in Leningrad in 1926) but by Bruno Walter. (It certainly does not diminish the achievement of the work to note a few features which proved a little over-ambitious for the teenage composer to control: notably, its strikingly eclectic style, and its slightly overloaded harmony, with virtually every main melody so sinuously chromatic it can be hard to tell them apart.)

Compared with Mahler, Brahms or Beethoven, the opening perky little duet for trumpet and bassoon certainly qualifies as a most unpretentious beginning to a symphonic career. Several disjointed fragments finally give way to an appropriately symphonic theme in the clarinet, over a muffled tramping in the lower strings; even that soon yields to a self-consciously jolly cabaret waltz in the flute. The introductory fragments receive as much attention in the development section as the supposed main themes; indeed the movement ends with the introductory trumpet and bassoon music, in the more sombre colours of clarinet and cellos.

The *Scherzo* is more orthodox. (Shostakovich had indeed had a few 'dry runs' at the form: his Op.1 and Op.7 are scherzos for orchestra.) The main theme still has plenty of chromatic notes, but this time they ornament an essentially diatonic outline. Shostakovich's own instrument, the piano, makes a few sparkling appearances, and unforgettably dominates the movement's close. One of the *Scherzo*'s most curious features is in fact barely audible. The central *Trio* section is notated in triple time, but sounds as if, like the rest of the movement, it is in quadruple time – the listener may just be able to make out that the accompanying triangle and snare drum mark out every third note of the theme.

This might seem scant reason for a change of time signature. However, it does enable Shostakovich to get maximum academic value from combining the main and trio themes towards the end of the movement, by adding a purely illusory degree of difficulty – and in a graduation piece that is perhaps justification enough.

Again the third movement's main theme (first presented by the solo oboe) is strikingly chromatic; it is eventually juxtaposed with an important rhythmic fragment dominated by four repeated notes. The movement's harmony only comes to rest on the final chord, for divided strings; a snare drum roll brings in the *Finale* without a break. There is a relatively slow introduction, leading to the urgent main theme divided between two clarinets; the movement's increasingly hectic progress is halted for a timpani solo, recalling the slow movement's rhythmic fragment, before regaining its momentum. The final pages feature a Mahlerian clash between major and minor modes – an appropriate ambiguity at the beginning of Shostakovich's career.

Notes by Carl Rosman © 2002

Shostakovich's First Symphony is scored for 3 flutes (2nd and 3rd doubling piccolo), 2 oboes, 2 clarinets and 2 bassoons; 4 horns, 2 trumpets, alto trumpet, 3 trombones and tuba; timpani, percussion, piano and strings.

It was first performed in May 1926, by the Leningrad Philharmonic conducted by Nicolai Malko – who would later serve as the second Chief Conductor of the Sydney Symphony Orchestra (1957–1961).

The Sydney Symphony first performed the symphony in October 1954, conducted by Walter Susskind.

Other notable performances include those conducted by Nicolai Malko (1957); Sergiu Comissiona (1973); Stanisław Skrowaczewski (1981); Jerzy Maksymiuk (1988); Alexander Lazarev (2002) and Gustavo Gimeno (2017).

Our most recent performances were in May 2021 in Sydney Town Hall, conducted by Fabian Russell.

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