

Tchaikovsky Piano Concerto No. 1 in B-flat minor, Op. 23

Peter Ilich Tchaikovsky

Born: May 8, 1840, Votinsk, District of Viatka

Died: November 6, 1893, St. Petersburg

In November 1874, Tchaikovsky, who had been composing his *First Piano Concerto*, wrote to his brother Anatol, "I am very anxious that [Nicholas] Rubinstein should play it at his concert. " Nicholas Rubinstein was not only a celebrated pianist, he was also the founder and head of the Moscow Conservatory, where Tchaikovsky was on the faculty. Getting this distinguished man to launch his work looked a great way to establish it in the repertoire.

Despite the fact that the *Concerto* was not yet finished. Tchaikovsky succeeded in persuading Rubinstein and another faculty member to give it a hearing. This took place in one of the Conservatory classrooms, just before everyone was schedule to attend a Christmas Eve party. Although Tchaikovsky was not a professional pianist, he gave it his best. What he got in return was the silent treatment, which left him covered with embarrassment.

There was nothing else to do but ask for an opinion, and the tirade that followed was an ego-shattering experience for the always hyper-sensitive composer. Later, describing the incident to his patroness, Nadezhda von Meck, he wrote, "Then burst forth from Rubinsteins's mouth a mighty torrent of words. He spoke quietly at first, then he waxed hot, and at last he resembled Zeus hurling thunderbolts. It appeared that my concerto was absolutely worthless, absolutely unplayable; passages were so commonplace and awkward that they could not be improved; the piece as a whole was bad, trivial, vulgar."

The composer's reaction was to remove the dedication to Rubinstein and replace it with the name of Hans von Bülow, the eminent German pianist / conductor who often expressed his admiration for Tchaikovsky's works. Von Bülow was so delighted with the *Concerto* that he made plans to perform it in Boston on an upcoming American tour. The pick-up orchestra assembled for von Bülow's concert was to have a German conductor, Carl Bergmann, the permanent conductor of the New York Philharmonic and reputedly "the best conductor in America." That, however, was not von Bülow's appraisal of his distinguished *Landsman*. He called him a Bierlummel (beer bum) and replaced him with an American, Benjamin Johnson Lang, a pianist / conductor who, like von Bülow, had been a pupil of Liszt. The orchestra members, on the other hand,

measured up to von Bülow's standards, and he described them as "largely German, industrious, their intelligence not yet drowned in larger beer."

The *Concerto's* premiere took place on October 25, 1875 and was received with enthusiasm and tumultuous applause. It was repeated on November 15 at a concert celebrating the opening of Chickering Hall in New York City, this time with Leopold Damrosch on the podium, conducting his newly-founded New York Symphony. Once more von Bülow made his bows to a cheering audience.

Reviews of the American concerts, arriving in St. Petersburg, vindicated the composer from the humiliation he had received from Rubinstein. The latter was ultimately to recant his previous assessment and finally take up the *Concerto* himself, using it as one of his great showpieces. There were many who would develop a love affair with this work, which has become one of the most frequently performed of all the concertos in the standard repertoire.

Tchaikovsky once said that a concerto was duel rather than a duet, and he must have had that in mind when threw down the gauntlet at the very beginning of the *b-flat minor Concerto*. Four horns in unison fling out a challenge to the piano, which answers with great chords on alternate beats. The grandiose theme that follows is first heard in the orchestra, while the piano accompanies it with rock-like chords that rise octaves to the end of each bar. The soloist then takes over the theme; there is a cadenza; and the orchestra is back in possession.

Actually, all this is a preparation for the main event. The concerto proper begins with a jerky little melody that Tchaikovsky called "the blind beggar's tune," having heard it played by such a person at a country fair. The second subject provides a perfect balance in an expressive theme first given to the clarinet. There will be more cadenza episodes before arrival at the brilliant coda.

The second movement begins with a disarmingly simple and naïve melody, first given to the flute and played over a pizzicato string accompaniment. Its middle section is scherzo-like.

There are three principle themes in the brilliant rondo that closes the *Concerto*-two vigorous, syncopated dances and a contrasting theme of sweeping lyricism- the ingredients for a dramatic denouement are all here, along with the perfect timing instinctive to this composer.

By Margery Derdeyn