ALEXANDER BORODIN
1833-1887

Overture, Prince Igor

Alexander Borodin – the illegitimate son of a prince of Tartar ancestry – was the oldest member of the Mighty Handful, of whom only Balakirev was a full-time composer. Born into a reasonably affluent middle-class background, Borodin was gifted in so many directions that he found it hard to divide his time among his various pursuits. Having graduated in medicine, he took up chemistry as a career and, in his early 30s, was appointed professor of chemistry at St Petersburg University. In his spare time he composed music: his close friend Rimsky-Korsakov recalled how he often found Borodin ‘at work in the laboratory next door to his flat. When he had finished what he was doing, he would come back with me to his flat, and we would play together or talk. Right in the middle he would jump up and rush back into the laboratory to make sure nothing had burnt or boiled over, all the while making the corridor echo with incredible sequences of successive sevenths or ninths…’ Borodin himself confessed: ‘I’m always slightly ashamed to admit that I compose…for others it’s a simple matter, a vocation, an end in life: but for me it’s a recreation, an idle pastime which provides diversion from my real work as professor and scientist.’

In April 1869 the influential critic Vladimir Stasov drew Borodin’s attention to a potential operatic subject: the heroic tale of Prince Igor Svyatoslavich’s campaign against the Polovtsi – the fierce warrior tribesmen from the steppes, forerunners of the dreaded Tartars. The composer enthusiastically set to work collecting suitable materials, both musical and historical, and by September that year he had begun composing, but in a rather desultory fashion, one number at a time, and making up the libretto as he went along. This piecemeal approach continued over the next 18 years, and the opera remained unfinished at his death in 1887. Thereafter Rimsky-Korsakov and Glazunov fell on the remains like vultures, orchestrating, filling in missing bits and playing them through on the piano. In this unsatisfactory state the opera finally reached the stage on 16 November 1890, at St Petersburg’s Mariinsky Theatre, but failed to hold a permanent place in the repertory. Only two sections have since achieved immortality: the ever-popular Polovtsian Dances from Act II, and the Overture, which is based largely on music from the second and third acts, set in the Polovtsi camp, where Igor and his son are held prisoner.

Borodin died before getting round to writing down the Overture, which is largely the work of Glazunov. According to both Rimsky-Korsakov and Stasov, Glazunov wrote it out ‘entirely from memory’, having heard Borodin play it through on the piano several times: but a different version of events was given by Glazunov himself in 1896: ‘The Overture I composed myself, more or less according to Borodin’s intention. I borrowed ideas from the corresponding sections of the opera and was lucky enough to find the canonic treatment at the end of the second subject amongst the composer’s sketches. I made some small changes to the fanfares in the Overture. (Those after the words “Sound, trumpets!” are wholly by Borodin. I kept the idea of fanfares in the Overture, but changed the order.) The bass progression in the central section I found sketched on a piece of paper, and the combination of the two ideas (Igor’s aria [in Act II] and a phrase from the Trio) also turned up amongst the composer’s papers. A few bars at the end were entirely by me.’
Whichever version one chooses to believe, it would seem that the Overture is, in fact, a ‘reconstruction’ by Glazunov, based on material from the opera, miscellaneous jottings by both Borodin and Glazunov, and his recollections of the composer’s own performances at the piano.

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PYOTR ILYICH TCHAIKOVSKY
1840 – 1893

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

*Allegro non troppo e molto maestoso – Allegro con spirito*

*Andantino semplice*

*Allegro con fuoco*

In January 1866, immediately after his graduation from the St Petersburg Conservatory, Tchaikovsky took up a teaching job at the newly established Moscow Conservatory, then under the direction of Nikolay Rubinstein, brother of Tchaikovsky’s former teacher, the great pianist Anton Rubinstein. A colourful, larger-than-life figure, a workaholic, notorious for his drinking and gambling, Nikolay Rubinstein welcomed Tchaikovsky into his circle of friends, including writers, musicians and publishers; and on 16 March he conducted an overture by the young composer at a concert of the Russian Musical Society. Its success – and Rubinstein’s benevolent patronage – encouraged Tchaikovsky to embark on a career primarily as composer, rather than as teacher and, over the next few years, he produced two symphonies (Winter Daydreams and The Little Russian), four operas, two tone-poems (including the enormously popular *Romeo and Juliet*), and other smaller works.

In November 1874, he wrote to his younger brother Modest: ‘I would like to start on a piano concerto but nothing comes’. Less than a month later he wrote to another brother: ‘I’m now wholly engrossed in writing a piano concerto. I really want Rubinstein to play it at his concert: but it comes very slowly and with great difficulty. I’m forcing myself to get down to it and forcing my brain to invent passage-work, and, as a result, my nerves are pretty much shot to pieces.’

Despite his pessimism, the concerto was finished in draft by Christmas. Tchaikovsky, though a reasonably competent pianist, was no virtuoso and, at that point, he decided to consult his former mentor Nikolay Rubinstein on the technical aspects of the piano writing. On Christmas Eve 1874 Tchaikovsky played the piece through to Rubinstein privately. According to the composer: ‘That evening we had both been invited to a Christmas party and Nikolay Rubinstein suggested that beforehand we should go into one of the classrooms of the Conservatory, and so we did...I played the first movement. Not a single word, not a single remark. If only you knew the awful position of a man who places before his friend a dish he has cooked himself, and his friend eats and remains silent! Oh say something, a bit of friendly criticism, for God’s sake, just one sympathetic word, even if not
complimentary... I plucked up my courage and played to the end. Again silence. I got up and asked “Well then?” Then from Rubinstein’s mouth poured a torrent of speech, quiet at first, then becoming more and more thunderous. It appeared that my concerto was useless, impossible to play, that passages were clichéd, awkward and so ungrateful that it was impossible to correct them, that the work was bad and trivial, that I had stolen bits from other people, that only two or three passages could stay, but the rest must be either thrown away or completely reworked. “Look at this, for example! Well, what is it? And this! Is it really possible?” And so on and so on. In a word, if an outsider had been in that room, he would have thought I was a maniac, a stupid and talentless hack, who had come to pester this great musician with his rubbish . . . I was not only astonished, but offended. I am no longer a child, trying my hand at composition. I no longer need lessons, especially ones expressed so abruptly and with such hostility. I will always need friendly advice, but this was nothing like friendly advice. It was indiscriminate, deliberate censure, expressed in a way that cut me to the quick.

‘I left the room in silence and went upstairs. I could not speak from disappointment and anger. Soon Rubinstein appeared, and seeing how upset I was, invited me into another room. There he repeated to me that my concerto was impossible and, pointing out numerous places that needed radical reworking, said that if I rewrote the concerto in a certain time according to his requirements, then he would do me the honour of performing the piece at his concert. “I will not alter a single note”, I answered, “and I will publish it in exactly the form it is now!” And so I did.’

Tchaikovsky’s instinct proved correct – although it is worth noting that in 1889, ten years after the original publication of the score of the First Concerto, he did thoroughly revise the piano part for a second edition, smoothing out many of the original infelicities. Rubinstein recognized the obvious virtues of the work fairly quickly. He conducted the Moscow première a year after his initial rejection of the piece, on 2 December 1875 (the soloist was a young student named Tanyeyev) and thereafter took it up himself, playing it in Russia and Paris in 1878. It was Hans von Bülow, however, who received the dedication, and who gave the world première of the concerto in Boston on 25 October 1875. American critics were as baffled by the piece as Rubinstein had been: one of them called the concerto ‘extremely difficult, strange, wild, ultra-modern... extremely brilliant and exciting, but could we ever learn to love such music?’

The answer, of course, is yes. The concerto now ranks with Rachmaninov’s Second as one of the best-loved piano concertos of all time, partly due to the instant appeal of its broad introductory melody, played first on strings against powerful block chords on the piano. This sweeping theme – which is derived from the musical equivalents of both Tchaikovsky’s name and that of Desirée Artôt, a young Belgian soprano with whom Tchaikovsky was briefly in love – is then repeated on the piano, which has a cadenza-like passage before the theme is resumed for the last time by the full orchestra (it never reappears). The ensuing Allegro con spirito begins with a scherzando presentation of its main theme on the piano. Like much of Tchaikovsky’s music of this period, the concerto is shot through with folk themes: the principal theme of the first movement is based on a melody which Tchaikovsky picked up from blind singers in the Ukraine. The second subject is romantically Schumannesque, while a more urgent third theme leads to an extensive orchestral interlude followed by the first of two piano cadenzas. This one acts as a bridge to the development section, which climaxes with another cadenza, leading into the coda.
The second movement, a simple ternary rondo structure marked *Andantino semplice*, features one of Tchaikovsky’s serene, long-breathed melodies, in the mellow key of D flat major. The central *prestissimo* gives the soloist a chance to indulge in sparkling virtuoso passage-work with a dance-like theme in D major based on the French folk-tune *Il faut s'amuser, danser et rire*. The main opening theme of the fiery sonata-rondo finale is another Ukrainian folk-song, which later gives way to another of Tchaikovsky’s passionate original melodies.

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**SERGEI RACHMANINOV**

*1873 – 1943*

**Symphony No. 1 in D minor, Op. 13**

*Grave – Allegro ma non troppo*

*Allegro animato*

*Larghetto*

*Allegro con fuoco*

Rachmaninov composed the first of his three symphonies between January and August 1895, when he was 22 and had a teaching post at the Mariinsky Institute for Girls in Moscow; it was his third orchestral work. He submitted the score to the Society of Russian Symphony Concerts in St Petersburg, and it was accepted, subject to a few revisions. The first performance was given in St Petersburg on 27 March 1897 (five days before Rachmaninov’s 24th birthday), with Glazunov conducting. It was disastrous. Glazunov apparently conducted in an utterly ‘deadpan’ manner, as though he were directing a class in elementary orchestration, and Rachmaninov finally left the hall in fury and disgust – only to attend, later the same evening, a dinner arranged in his honour by the publisher Belaiev, at which all the important musical personalities in St Petersburg were present. ‘How could a great musician like Glazunov conduct so badly?’ he wrote to a friend after the performance. ‘It is not even a question of stick-technique, though his is poor enough, but of musicianship: he beats time as if he has no feeling for music whatever.’ The press (who were in any case prejudiced against the Moscow school) were highly abusive: Cui accused Rachmaninov of ‘morbid distortion of harmony and sickly addiction to sombre moods’, and declared that ‘if there were a conservatoire in hell and one of its students had been asked to compose a symphony on the subject of the seven plagues of Egypt and had written a symphony like Rachmaninov’s, he would have won a prize for it’. No wonder Rachmaninov tore up the score and refused to allow the work to be published. However, the orchestral parts came to light during the Second World War in the Conservatoire in Leningrad (formerly, of course, St Petersburg) and, with the aid of these and of the composer’s own reduction for piano duet, the score was carefully reconstructed by Soviet musicologists, and the resuscitated symphony was given its first performance for nearly 50 years in the Great Hall of the Moscow Conservatoire on 17 October 1945, by the USSR State Symphony...
Orchestra under the direction of Alexander Gauk.

The irony of the affair is that, despite its obvious – and understandable – debts to Borodin and Tchaikovsky, the D minor Symphony is in many respects superior in construction to Rachmaninov’s two other symphonies. Its first movement opens with a short slow introduction whose initial upward-sliding motif is to act as a ‘motto’, reappearing at the beginning of each succeeding movement (and elsewhere). The main theme of the *Allegro* is an extension of the theme propounded in this introduction, and the second subject, Tchaikovsky-like, is a combination of three ideas announced in quick succession and in slower tempo. The development (beginning like that of the first movement in Tchaikovsky’s Sixth Symphony with a *fortissimo* explosion) starts off with a fugal discussion of the first subject and reaches its climax in a broad, chorale-like transformation of it, which suggests that the theme was derived from a chant of the Russian Orthodox Church. The second movement (in F major) is a *scherzo* of great resource and subtlety, notable for the economy of its scoring and for its vacillation between wistfulness and an almost ghostly eeriness. The ‘motto’ reappears about half-way through, and we may also detect a veiled reference to the ‘Dies Irae’ theme that Rachmaninov was to use so effectively elsewhere.

The *Larghetto* in B flat major, also lightly scored for the most part, is in effect a rhapsodical meditation on a long, winding theme initiated by the first clarinet; there is a brief middle section derived from a dramatic incursion of the ‘motto’. The finale, basically and finally in D major, is anything but lightly scored: indeed Rachmaninov unleashes here a whole welter of orchestral sound. The movement could loosely be described as being in sonata form, but its episodic nature imparts a strong feeling of rondo design. The exuberant first subject (a transformation of the first movement’s main theme) and the soaring second subject are in strong contrast to one another, and there are numerous subsidiary ideas, including references to the ‘motto’. The movement ends with an expansive coda.

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