



Thames Youth Orchestra

Simon Ferris, conductor

Patrick Milne, piano

Concert

Saturday April 2nd 2011

7.30pm

All Saints Kingston

Programme

Dmitri Shostakovich (1906-1975) Festive Overture in A major Op. 96

In the months following the death of Stalin in 1953 and the composition of the immense and self-affirming Tenth Symphony, Shostakovich entered a period of relative compositional sluggishness, from which he emerged in a bolt of surprising energy. In response to a commission (at the beginning of November 1954) for a concert overture for a gathering at the Bolshoi, to be held in celebration of the 37th anniversary of the October Revolution, he was able to compose the *Festive Overture* in two days, the pages of manuscript being rushed to the theatre one at a time by special courier, with the ink (so the story goes) still wet.

The composition of occasional music for the Soviet state did not so much go against the grain for Shostakovich, as invoke his sense of musical irony, audible partly in the use made of the distinctly wry musical personalities of certain instruments - the clarinet, for instance, or the piccolo, or snare drum - capering here like subversive wise-cracking clowns from the commedia dell'Arte; and partly in the overall frame of the work: a *festive* overture, almost by definition, taps into the *carnevolesque*, or the *saturnalia*: modes which could be said to represent the theoretical or psycho-social heart of the revolution and which had, to a great extent, been lost (if it had ever been found) in the dark years of the war and of Stalin's rule.

The musicologist Lev Nikolayevich Lebedinsky, who was apparently present during much of the breakneck composition, noted that during composition Shostakovich was able to smoke and drink tea, chat and joke continually without lifting his head from the manuscript, a manic performance in its own right that finds its counterpart in the skittering strings of the presto theme punctuated by rhythmic jabs on the brass, which in turn mirrors (or mocks) the furious *presto* portrait of Stalin in the Tenth Symphony.

This first theme proper follows a dense fanfare chorale which prefigures the shape of that theme, but not its burlesque impishness, clarinet and carolling wind launched over a propulsive, lilting rhythmic drive, giving way to galloping double-tongued brass; the second theme, a broad tune for cellos, plays out over the same relentlessly scuttling rhythm; and the whole culminates, first in an adept counterpointing of first and second themes, and then in a restatement of the opening brass fanfare.

Sergei Rachmaninov (1873-1943) Piano Concerto No 2 in C minor Op.18

- I. *Moderato*
- II. *Adagio sostenuto*
- III. *Allegro scherzando*

Composition was always problematic for Rachmaninov, and the circumstances of the genesis of the second piano concerto were a particularly acute example of his sensitivity to the psycho-emotional conditions under which he worked.

The concerto emerged at the end of a period of three years in which he had composed precisely nothing (although he had continued to work as a performer and conductor), a direct result of the hostile reception to his first symphony, the first performance of which had been a fiasco, conducted by a Glazunov either incompetent or drunk; Rachmaninov himself had sat in the foyer with his fingers in his ears; and the grandees of Russian music assembled to hear the first symphonic essay of the young prodigy were aggressively hostile (César Cui described it in print as a 'programme symphony on the seven plagues of Egypt').

Rachmaninov emerged from the ensuing compositional void through the professional mediation of Dr. Nicolai Dahl, a hypnotherapist; (friends had previously arranged a meeting with the venerable Leo Tolstoy, whose own version of therapy, Rachmaninov later recalled, consisted in stroking his knee and telling him to work - "you must work; I work every day" - , and remarking, when Rachmaninov played a piece for him, "does anybody really need music like that?"). His sessions with Dr. Dahl (the present work's eventual dedicatee) were more helpful. While it seems that the doctor's informed conversation was as useful as his hypnotherapy (Rachmaninov had to intone, among other things, "you will begin your concerto.... it will be excellent"), the sessions nevertheless gradually restored his confidence; and when he visited his friend, the bass Chaliapin, in Italy in the summer of 1900 he was able to begin work, completing the concerto on his return to Moscow in August that year. He gave the first, well-received performance (of the second and third movements only) that December, and the first full performance the following year.

The work opens with a bell-like tolling which leads to the first theme group in which the piano, as so often in this movement, is the accompanist; Rachmaninov was worried before the first performance that the entry of the piano, solo, at the outset of the second theme, would be taken by the audience as the beginning of the concerto proper. It is an arresting gesture, the piano's first essay into the *cantabile* line that lies at the heart of the concerto; but the scintillations of solo pianism, throughout the concerto as a whole, are frequently put at the service of the orchestral whole.

The second movement begins (after a brief chorale homage to Tchaikovsky's Fifth Symphony) with the piano again playing accompanist to flute and then clarinet, the roles reversed in due course; this dialogic relationship is then maintained through the more intense, minor key central passage. Much of the material from the movement is derived from an early work, *Romance*, written for the Skalon sisters, the youngest of whom had been an early infatuation. The variably accented piano line of the opening accompaniment, running at a slight rhythmic counterpoint to the solo instruments, is responsible, perhaps, for the faintly uneasy repose of the movement as a whole.

The finale is also rooted in the *cantabile* Russian tradition, alternating a bravura first theme with a meditative but essentially affirmative second theme in variations which encompass brisk fugue, *nachtmusik*, maestoso augmentation, and other stylistic sorties, as though we are listening to a man trying out his compositional muscles after three years of atrophy, and being quietly delighted to find them not only in excellent functioning order, but better than he remembered.

Interval (20 minutes)

Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky (1840-1893) Symphony No.4 in F minor Op. 36

- I. *Andante sostenuto – Moderato con anima – Moderato assai, quasi Andante – Allegro vivo*
- II. *Andantino in modo di canzone*
- III. *Scherzo. Pizzicato ostinato. Allegro*
- IV. *Finale. Allegro con fuoco*

Speaking of the opening of his Fourth Symphony in a letter to his patron and confidante, Nadezhda Filaretovna von Meck, a wealthy heiress to whom he was beholden for the freedom to compose, and whom he never met (and to whom the work is dedicated), Tchaikovsky wrote “This is Fate, i.e., that fateful force which prevents the impulse towards happiness from entirely achieving its goal.”

The malevolence of fate, it can be assumed, was much on Tchaikovsky’s mind during the composition of the Fourth Symphony in 1877-78, the year in which he not only cemented his relationship with von Meck, but also precipitously entered into a marriage with a former pupil at the Conservatory (Antonina Ivanovna Milyukova) whom he had not seen for twelve years and (according to the occasionally jaundiced memoir of his brother Modest) could not remember, but who contacted him by letter declaring her love. Whatever the motive for this marriage – the concealment of his homosexuality, a placatory gesture towards his father, and the relief of money worries have been mooted as possible reasons – it rapidly brought on a crisis of mental health; within two weeks he had taken flight to the Ukraine, returned the following September, attempted suicide (he apparently threw himself in the freezing Volga in the vain hope of catching pneumonia), suffered an ‘attack of nerves’ that left him unconscious for a fortnight, and renewed his flight, this time irrevocably, travelling to Italy, to Venice, San Remo and Florence, where he recuperated sufficiently to resume work on *Eugene Onegin* (also centred gravitationally on a polonaise and a waltz) and begin work on the fourth symphony.

However, whether or not Tchaikovsky regarded the symphony as in some way a response to his emotional disarray, it was without question a musical response, conceived – or at any rate played out – as a musical struggle with that other malevolence (for Tchaikovsky), Beethoven, or more precisely, the legacy of Beethoven as embodied in figures otherwise as diverse as Brahms and Wagner. In Tchaikovsky’s view, the motivic, atomised approach to musical composition exemplified by, for example, Brahms in his symphonies, whereby fragments of musical ideas are sifted and manipulated and reordered like thaumaturgic objects, was not merely a limit on expressivity but its antonym. The expressive heart of music for Tchaikovsky (as for Rachmaninov) was the *cantabile* line, and it is unsurprising that he identified Mozart as his forebear; Mozart, with his dual gift for dwelling in a tonal space and allowing a melodic line to play out, was, like Tchaikovsky and unlike either Beethoven, Haydn or Brahms, a man of the

theatre, one with an understanding of music as a dramatic rather than discursive art, and thus, in Tchaikovsky's view, a fully expressive musician.

Tchaikovsky also took explicit if oblique issue with another aspect of Beethoven's legacy – the paradigm of struggle and victory of the Fifth Symphony, with its redemptive movement from C minor to C major. In a letter to his friend, the composer Tanayev, he wrote “my work [the Fourth Symphony] is a reflection of Beethoven's Fifth Symphony. I have not, of course, copied Beethoven's musical content, only borrowed the central idea”. In Tchaikovsky's hands, however, this central *agon* becomes, not a disciplined route march to Victory, but a despondent, even bewildered retreat from moments of apotheosis and happiness.

The principal rhetorical device of this struggle is interruption, with the opening Fate motif returning at key emotional junctures throughout the symphony (most notably in the first and fourth movements) and imposing itself on the free and forgetful flow of music. Richard Taruskin notes that the Fate motif (with its dotted rhythms) is in the form of a polonaise, and it is the interrelation of that aristocratic and quasi-militaristic dance, and the nervously intense waltz of the first theme proper, which provides the core of musical dialectic in the colossal first movement as a whole.

In spite of Tchaikovsky's insistence in correspondence on the unmediated emotional drive of the work, the movement is in fact structured in a sonata form that wheels through a cycle of minor 3rds. But even here, it could be argued, keys are used as characters in the work; and the movement concludes with a gesture – the waltz, played in triple augmentation, assimilated to the polonaise, losing its character of ‘waltz’ entirely in a moment of fatalistic submission – which Taruskin describes as a moment of “operatic” terror’.

The second movement (*ABA*) marked *in modo di canzone*, opens with a theme, first played by the oboe and then taken up by the cellos, which the composer described as evoking “the melancholy feeling which comes upon us towards evening...you feel nostalgic for the past, yet no compulsion to start life over again”. Here too, at the return of the theme towards the conclusion of the movement, the faltering forward motion of the theme is interrupted by ghostly brass chords.

The scherzo alternates the orchestral choirs – pizzicato strings, strident wind and brass bands – reminiscent of that other theatrical form in which Tchaikovsky excelled – the ballet. The famous pizzicato passage dramatically throws its curtailed musical gestures around the string ensemble; the wind and brass passages form a sort of bucolic trio, like country bands, the stomping strident dances counterpointing the faintly diabolical pizzicato strings which surround them like restless souls being rushed about on some Dantesque wind.

The fourth movement is a rondo, a forgetful celebration (“go among the people, see how they understand how to be happy...”) in which Tchaikovsky takes the Russian folk song ‘In the field stood a birch tree’ (the melody's metrical distinctiveness all but erased by the composer) as one of his themes. But again the Fate motif returns, and while Tchaikovsky talked about human powerlessness in the face of external fate, here the drama creates its own interruption; this polonaise, this Fate, is not something external, imposed, but something generated from within; this is music that interrupts itself.

TYO Staff

Musical Director – Simon Ferris
Executive Director – Rebecca Lacey
First Violins Coach – Adrian Charlesworth
Second Violins Coach – Dominika Rosiek
Violas Coach – Pippa Hyde
Cellos Coach – Sarah Hedley-Miller
Bass Coach – Alice Kent
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Friends Coordinator – Louise Carpenter

TYO is indebted to Hani Madanat of Coombe Residential for his extremely generous continuing support.

Simon Ferris, conductor

Simon Ferris, founder director of the Thames Youth Orchestra, read music and was organ scholar at King's College London. As an undergraduate he pursued additional instrumental and musicianship studies with Bernard Oram at the Guildhall School of Music and Drama and, after graduation, received composition tuition and encouragement from the composer and John Ireland pupil, Geoffrey Bush.

A skilled and experienced jazz pianist, Simon's wide-ranging professional career now embraces an array of genres and disciplines, as performer, composer (published by ABRSM), arranger, writer (with programme note credits for, among others the Maggini Quartet and the Hanover Band), conductor and teacher, with duties including preparing children's choirs for the Royal Opera House, Covent Garden.

Simon is currently Musician in Residence at Tiffin School, and Musician in Residence at Tiffin Girls' School, Kingston upon Thames, where in addition to his composing and performing duties he also teaches harmony.

Friends of TYO

The purpose of the Friends' Association is to provide financial support to the orchestra to help offset the significant expenses of running a full-scale symphonic ensemble. These costs include music, venue and instrument hire, staffing, performing rights, publicity, transport, maintaining a web presence, catering – the list goes on.

The cost of membership of the friends' scheme is £15 per annum for an individual subscription, £25 for family membership and £40 for corporate members. The benefits are as follows:

- Reduced ticket prices for concerts and events
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For further details, or to apply for membership, please contact Friends Coordinator, Louise Carpenter:
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Thames Youth Orchestra

First Violins

Anna Selig*

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James Scollick
Adisha Kapila
David Kola
Sung-Hyo Lee
Toby Piachaud
Louis Watkins
Hana Wilford

Second Violins

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Hermione Kellow
Toby Piachaud
Jessica Plummer
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Kath Roberts
William Brunt
Nina Lim
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Grace Moon*

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Eunyoung Lee*

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Susie Bridge

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*principal

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Tuba

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