

Romance & Revolution 1 May 2027

Tchaikovsky (1840-1893)

Piano Concerto No. 1 in B-flat Minor, Op. 23
Allegro non troppo e molto maestoso
Andantino semplice
Allegro con fuoco

Stravinsky (1882-1971)

Le Sacre du Printemps

I. The Fertility of the Earth

Introduction; Dance of Youths and Maidens; Dance of Abduction; Spring Rounds; Games of the Rival Towns; Entrance of the Celebrant; Dance to the Earth

II. The Sacrifice Introduction; Mystic Circle of the Adolescents; Dance to the Glorified One; Evocation of Ancestors; Ritual Performance of the Ancestors; Sacrificial Dance

At age twenty-one, Peter Ilyich Tchaikovsky (1840-93) quit law school to study composition and orchestration at St. Petersburg Conservatory. After graduating in 1865, he was hired to teach harmony at the Moscow Conservatory, where he remained until 1875, when severe depression led him to resign from teaching. The composer was often depressed and pessimistic, and much has been written about his homosexual angst. Nevertheless, Tchaikovsky, whose music was greatly influenced by the West, was quite prolific between 1869 and 1874, composing his first three string quartets, the perennially popular first piano concerto, the third symphony, the ballet *Swan Lake*, and two symphonic fantasies, *The Tempest* and *Romeo and Juliet*. Piano Concerto No.1 was written in 1874. A repeated four-note descending pattern intoned by the four French horns introduces the well-known lyrical string melody that begins the *Allegro non troppo*, accompanied by fortissimo chords on the piano. Following the introduction, the movement proper begins with the pianist playing a rhythmic tune that Tchaikovsky borrowed from Ukrainian folksong tradition. A lyrical second theme provides contrast. The themes are developed in the composer's inimitable dramatic style amidst showy arpeggios and impassioned outbursts from orchestra and soloist alike. In the recapitulation, the oboe presents the secondary theme that was first heard in the clarinet. Muted, plucked strings provide an ostinato backdrop for the flutes' sweetly impassioned melody at the beginning of the *Andantino semplice*. The piano imitates the flutes and a pastoral scene unfolds. When a solo cello sings the theme, the piano provides gentle staccato accompaniment. After a prestissimo middle section, cascading arpeggios on the piano lead to the return of the original theme, played by the soloist with extended trills. The *Allegro* begins *con fuoco* (with fire) as the pianist plays a tricky passage of ornamented parallel thirds. The theme demonstrates again the influence of Ukrainian folk music on Tchaikovsky's compositional style. Another lyrical secondary theme appears and alternates with the folk tune, which becomes quite insistent. The soloist has ample opportunity to dazzle before the concerto comes to a rousing finish.

DID YOU KNOW? In 1958 at the height of the Cold War, American pianist Van Cliburn became a household name overnight after winning top prize at the first Tchaikovsky International Piano Competition in Moscow. The competition had been implemented to demonstrate Soviet artistry, but the standing ovation for Cliburn's rendition of Piano Concerto No. 1 tipped the balance in the American's favor. The twenty-three-year-old appeared on the cover of *Time* magazine with the caption "The Texan who Conquered Russia."

Born near St. Petersburg, Igor Stravinsky (1882-1971) had the good fortune to study with Rimsky-Korsakov, a master orchestrator. Between 1910 and 1939, he lived in Paris and Switzerland and became a naturalized French citizen. Ballet was an important genre during the 1900s when rhythm often replaced melody as the primary focus in "classical" compositions. In 1910 Sergei Diaghilev, the founder/director of the Ballets Russes, commissioned Stravinsky to write a ballet. The Firebird premiered that year and was such a success that Diaghilev immediately commissioned another ballet. Rimsky-Korsakov's influence is evident in the lush orchestration of Firebird, but Stravinsky began to demonstrate his own voice in *Petrushka*, with more modernistic tendencies such as frequently changing meters, multiple ostinatos, and even bitonality (two tonal centers at the same time). Of course, the choreographer and dancers found it difficult to deal with the complicated rhythms and inconsistent meters, but Stravinsky was just getting started; his next collaboration with Diaghilev, *Le sacre du printemps* (*The Rite of Spring*, 1913), almost caused a riot with its pounding, primitivistic rhythms and story line of the pagan sacrifice of a virgin. It became one of the most influential works of the century and is still frequently performed today. Tonight's concert version is also a regular item in orchestral programming, scored for a huge orchestra: piccolo, three flutes, alto flute, four oboes, English horn, three clarinets, bass clarinet, four bassoons, contrabassoon, eight horns (!), piccolo trumpet, four trumpets, bass trumpet, three trombones, two tubas, two timpanists, percussion (two antique cymbals, bass drum, cymbals, güiro, tam-tam, tambourine), and strings. After the mystical bassoon solo in its upper range introduces "The Fertility of the Earth," violently hammered chords occur in seemingly random rhythmic patterns. At times Stravinsky changes the meter in every measure. Many rehearsals were required, individually for the orchestra and for the dancers, and then joint rehearsals; still, choreographer Nijinsky supposedly yelled numbers from the stage wings to help the dancers count during the premiere. The complex meters, syncopation, and the raw primitivism achieved by the extremely large orchestra served to intensify the already difficult subject matter of a young woman dancing herself to death to appease the gods of spring. Try to picture yourself as part of the Parisian audience one hundred years ago. Imagine the innocence of the young woman in long braids whirling on stage in her embroidered native attire. As she is penned in the middle of a circle of tribal elders wearing bear headdresses, her panic is palpable in her awkward, knock-kneed quaking that is interrupted by irregular leaps in the air, timed to the offbeat accents in the music. Stravinsky's driving repetitions of short melodic motifs (ostinatos) and the dissonance caused by polytonality reinforce the savagery of the plot and the choreography. Whether or not the riot at the premiere was simply good public relations on the part of impresario Diaghilev (as some believe) or the initial audience's genuine horror at the raw nature of the ballet's story and music, one can certainly understand the groundbreaking nature of this event. Like many of his musical colleagues, Stravinsky left Europe during World War II. After living in the New England area and participating in the Harvard lecture series in 1939-40, he settled in Los Angeles and became a US citizen in 1945. Stravinsky has a star on the Hollywood Walk of Fame and a posthumously-awarded 1987 Grammy for Lifetime Achievement.

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