

2017-2018 Season
March 24 and 25, 2018
Program Notes

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The Young Person's Guide to the Orchestra
(Variations and Fugue on a Theme of Purcell), Op. 34 (1946)
Benjamin Britten (1913-1976)

Henry Purcell was much on Benjamin Britten's mind in 1945. November 21st was the 250th anniversary of Purcell's death, and Britten paid homage to the great Restoration composer in two works written for a concert commemorating the event. One was the song cycle *Holy Sonnets of John Donne*, heavily influenced in its structure and word setting by the music of Purcell. The other was the Second String Quartet, whose finale is a *Chacony* ("Chaconne") modeled on Purcell's splendid examples of that form. It was also in 1945 that Britten and tenor Peter Pears began work on their performing editions of Purcell's songs. (Britten may have felt a further kinship with Purcell at the time in that *Peter Grimes* had premiered earlier that year to praise naming it the greatest English opera since *Dido and Aeneas*.) When Britten was commissioned the following year to compose a piece demonstrating the instruments of the orchestra, he chose to base the work on a theme from the music of Purcell.

Early in 1946, the British Ministry of Education approached Britten with a request to compose music for a film they were preparing to introduce the orchestra to children, and he agreed to the project. He cast his work in the form of a series of variations with a concluding fugue based on the hornpipe from Purcell's incidental music to *Abdelazar, or The Moor's Revenge* (1695), and gave it the dual title of *The Young Person's Guide to the Orchestra* and *Variations and Fugue on a Theme of Purcell*. (He is said to have preferred the former.) The film, titled simply *The Instruments of the Orchestra*, was first shown on November 2, 1946, but Britten's music had already been heard in a concert by the Liverpool Philharmonic Orchestra under the direction of Malcolm Sargent on October 15th.

Though inscribed to children, there is nothing childish about the work, which is probably Britten's most-often performed composition. *The Young Person's Guide* is music of brilliant craftsmanship that not only serves the didactic purpose for which it was intended, but also stands sturdily on its own as a piece of abstract music. As one of the small number of independent sets of orchestral variations, it is a worthy successor to the works in that genre by Brahms, Dvořák, Reger, Dohnányi and Elgar. Britten's *Guide* is constructed in three large sections. The first presents the full orchestra and then "the four teams of players," as the instrumental choirs are called in the preface to the score: woodwinds, brass, strings and percussion. The work's second section is a series of variations presenting the instruments

individually. In these variations, Britten not only found a mode of expression well suited to the character of each instrument, but he also devised consistently ingenious commentaries on Purcell's melody. First the woodwinds are heard — brilliant arabesques for flutes and piccolo, a bittersweet strain for oboes, a nimble duet for clarinets, and a jocular march with a lyrical obbligato for bassoons. (In the original film, and for many performances, a spoken commentary introduces each variation and gives a word about the nature of each instrument.) The strings are next. A dashing *polonaise* for violins, warm, romantic melodies for violas and then cellos, a wide-ranging variation for double basses, and an accompanied cadenza for harp. The variations are rounded out by the brasses — horns, trumpets, trombones with tuba — and a goodly sampling of percussion instruments. The concluding section of the *Guide* is a fugue whose theme is loosely based on Purcell's melody, with each of the instruments joining the fugue in the order in which it was introduced in the variations. Just as the fugue seems about to burst from its own complexity, Purcell's original theme is recalled in a gloriously majestic proclamation by the brass while the rest of the orchestra continues the fugue as accompaniment. This masterful essay on orchestral tone color comes to a rousing close with a splash of percussion and a full-throated cadence from the assembled instruments.

Piano Concerto No. 1 in E-flat major (1839-1849, revised 1853) Franz Liszt (1811-1886)

“Franz Liszt was one of the most brilliant and provocative figures in music history. As a pianist, conductor, composer, teacher, writer and personality — for with Liszt, being a colorful personality was itself a profession — his immediate influence upon European music can hardly be exaggerated. His life was a veritable pagan wilderness wherein flourished luxuriant legends of love affairs, illegitimate children, encounters with great figures of the period, and hairbreadth escapes from a variety of romantic murders. Unlike Wagner and Berlioz, Liszt never wrote the story of his life, for, as he casually remarked, he was too busy living it.” If it were not for the fact that Liszt's life had been so thoroughly documented by his contemporaries, we might think that the preceding description by Abraham Veinus was based on some profligate fictional character out of E.T.A. Hoffmann. Not so. By all accounts, Liszt led the most sensational life ever granted to a musician. In his youth and early manhood, he received the sort of wild and unbuttoned adulation that today is seen only at the appearances of a select handful of rock stars. He was the first musical artist in history with enough nerve to keep an entire program to himself rather than providing the grab-bag of orchestral, vocal and instrumental pieces scattered across an evening's entertainment that was the typical early-19th-century concert. He dubbed those solo concerts “musical soliloquies” at first, and later called them by the now-familiar term, “recitals.” (“How can one *recite* at the piano? Preposterous!” fumed one British writer.)

By 1848 Liszt had made his fortune, secured his fame and decided that he had been touring long enough, so he gave up performing, appearing in public during the last four decades of his life only for an occasional benefit concert. Amid the variegated patchwork of duchies, kingdoms and city-states that constituted pre-Bismarck Germany, he chose to settle in the small but sophisticated city of Weimar, where Sebastian Bach held a job early in his career. Once installed at Weimar, Liszt took over the musical establishment there and elevated it into one of the most important centers of European artistic culture. He stirred up interest in such neglected composers as Schubert, and encouraged such younger ones as Saint-Saëns, Wagner and Grieg by performing their works. He also gave much of his energy to his own original compositions, and created many of the pieces for which he is known today — the symphonies, piano concertos, symphonic poems and choral works. Liszt had composed before he moved to Weimar, of course — his total output numbers between 1,400 and 1,500 separate works — but the early pieces were mainly piano solos for use at his own recitals. His later works are not only indispensable components of the Romantic musical era in their own right, but also were an important influence on other composers in their form, harmony and poetic content.

As if composing, conducting and performing were insufficient, Liszt was also one of the most sought-after piano teachers of the 19th century. He was popular with students not just because he possessed an awesome technique that was (and remains) the model of every serious pianist. Liszt was also a direct link to that nearly deified figure, the glorious Beethoven, who had, so the story went, actually kissed the young prodigy on the forehead with his own lips. Furthermore, Liszt was a pupil of Carl Czerny, the most eminent student of Beethoven. To make this already unassailable combination of technique and tradition absolutely irresistible, Liszt brought to it an all-encompassing view of man and his world that enabled the mere tones of the piano to surpass themselves and open unspeakable realms of transcendent delight. One friend once remarked about the composer's wide variety of interests, "One could never know in which mental stall Liszt would find his next hobby horse." He was a truly remarkable man, one of the most important figures in terms of his cumulative influence on the art in all of 19th-century music.

Liszt sketched his two piano concertos in 1839, during his years of touring the music capitals of Europe, but they lay unfinished until he became court music director at Weimar in 1848. The first ideas for the E-flat Concerto appeared in a notebook as early as 1830, but the score was not completed, according to a letter from Liszt's eventual son-in-law, the pianist/conductor Hans von Bülow, until June 1849; it was revised in 1853. The premiere was part of a week of gala concerts honoring the music of Hector Berlioz at the Grand Ducal palace in Weimar, thus allowing the French composer to conduct while Liszt played. A memorable evening!

Liszt required of a concerto that it be "clear in sense, brilliant in expression, and grand in style." In

other words, it had to be a knockout. While it was inevitable that the E-flat Concerto would have a high degree of finger-churning display, it was not automatic that it should also be of fine musical quality — but it is. Liszt undertook an interesting structural experiment in the Concerto by fusing the substance of the concerto form with the architecture of the symphony. (“Music is never stationary,” he once pronounced. “Successive forms and styles can only be like so many resting places — like tents pitched and taken down again on the road to the Ideal.”) Though the work is played continuously, four distinct sections may be discerned within its span: an opening *Allegro*, built largely from the bold theme presented immediately at the outset; an *Adagio* that grows from a lyrical, arched melody initiated by the cellos and basses; a vivacious, scherzo-like section enlivened by the glistening tintinnabulations of the solo triangle; and a closing *Allegro marziale* that gathers together the motives of the preceding sections into a rousing conclusion. Of the finale, Liszt wrote, “It is only an urgent recapitulation of the earlier subject matter with quickened, livelier rhythm, and contains no new motive.... This kind of *binding together* and rounding off of a whole piece at its close is somewhat my own, but it is quite maintained and justified from the standpoint of musical form.” Béla Bartók judged this Concerto, because of its grandiose recall and interpenetration of themes in the finale, to be “the first perfect realization of cyclical sonata form.” It was this formal concept — a single-movement work in several sections utilizing just one or two themes — that Liszt was also to use in his tone poems of the following two decades and in the Second Piano Concerto.

Liszt’s First Concerto drew much criticism when it was new: not for its novel formal construction — but for its innovative use of the triangle. When the piece was first performed in Vienna in 1857, the powerful critic and redoubtable Wagner-Bruckner-Liszt hater, Eduard Hanslick, called it, disparagingly, the “Triangle Concerto.” Liszt rushed to the defense: “As regards the triangle I do not deny that it may give offense, especially if struck too strong or not precisely. A preconceived disinclination and objection to instruments of percussion prevails, somewhat justified by the frequent misuse of them.... In the face of the most wise proscription of the learned critics I shall, however, continue to employ instruments of percussion, and think I shall yet win for them some effects little known.”

Symphony No. 5 in E minor, Op. 64 (1888) **Peter Ilyich Tchaikovsky (1840-1893)**

Tchaikovsky was never able to maintain his self-confidence for long, and his opinion of a new work frequently fluctuated between the extremes of satisfaction and denigration. The unjustly neglected *Manfred Symphony* of 1885, for example, left his pen as “the best I have ever written,” but the work failed to make a good impression at its premiere, and Tchaikovsky’s estimation of it tumbled. The lack of success of *Manfred* was particularly painful because he had not produced a major orchestral work

since the Violin Concerto of 1878, and the score's failure left him with the gnawing worry that he might be "written out." The three years after *Manfred* were devoid of creative work.

It was not until May 1888 that Tchaikovsky again took up the challenge of the blank page. On May 27th he wrote to his brother Modeste, "To speak frankly, I feel as yet no impulse for creative work. What does this mean? Have I written myself out? No ideas, no inclination! Still, I am hoping to collect, little by little, material for a symphony." Though he was unusually secretive about the progress of this new piece, he must have begun it as soon as this letter was written, since the sketch of the complete score was finished just six weeks later. "I am exceedingly anxious to prove to myself, as to others," he wrote to his benefactress, Nazedha von Meck, "that I am not played out as a composer." He worked doggedly on the symphony, ignoring illness, the premature encroachment of old age (he was only 48, but suffered from continual exhaustion and loss of vision), and his troubling self-doubts, and when it was completed, by the end of August, he allowed, "I have not blundered; it has turned out well."

Tchaikovsky's satisfaction was soon mitigated, however, by the work's premiere in St. Petersburg on November 17, 1888. Though the Fifth Symphony was applauded by the public, he felt that it was a failure, that the ovation was for his earlier pieces rather than for this new one, and that the whole affair was cause for "a deep dissatisfaction with myself." Modeste was convinced that any negative reaction to the Fifth Symphony — and the critics had some — could be traced to an inadequate performance, but Tchaikovsky could not be persuaded of the work's value until a performance in Hamburg early in 1889, when musicians, critics and audience alike received it enthusiastically. Even the venerable Johannes Brahms, who was not strongly drawn to the music of his Russian colleague, made a special effort to attend the performance on a visit to his hometown. Tchaikovsky was buoyed by his reception in Hamburg, and his estimation of the Fifth Symphony (and of himself) shot up once again. The work has remained among the staples of the concert repertory.

Tchaikovsky never gave any indication that the Symphony No. 5, unlike the Fourth Symphony, had a program, though he may well have had one in mind. Years after its composition, some rough sketches that apparently refer to the Symphony No. 5 were discovered in his notebooks: "Introduction. Complete resignation before Fate, or, which is the same, before the inscrutable predestination of Providence. Allegro (1) Murmurs, doubts, complaints against XXX. (2) Shall I throw myself into the embrace of faith???" The "XXX" probably referred to Tchaikovsky's homosexuality, the only matter he concealed behind secret signs in his notes and diary. If that is so, the Fifth Symphony represents Tchaikovsky's resignation to his fate in the way he could best command — music. The workings of fate were an obsessive theme with him, and the program of the earlier Fourth Symphony portrays man's happiness crushed by that intractable power at every turn. In their biography of the composer, Lawrence and Elisabeth Hanson reckoned Tchaikovsky's view of fate as the motivating force in the Symphony No. 5,

though they distinguished its interpretation from that in the Fourth Symphony. “In the Fourth Symphony,” the Hansons wrote, “the Fate theme is earthy and militant, as if the composer visualizes the implacable enemy in the form, say, of a Greek god. In the Fifth, the majestic Fate theme has been elevated far above earth, and man is seen, not as fighting a force that thinks on its own terms, of revenge, hate or spite, but as a wholly spiritual power which subjects him to checks and agonies for the betterment of his soul.”

The structure of the Fifth Symphony reflects this process of “betterment.” It progresses from minor to major, from darkness to light, from melancholy to joy — or at least to acceptance and stoic resignation. It is the same path Beethoven blazed in his Fifth Symphony, and the power of such a musico-philosophical construction was not lost on Tchaikovsky, or on any other 19th-century musician. The sense of a perilous obstacle surmounted through struggle energizes both works, and is the substance of any “message” that Tchaikovsky may have embedded in this Symphony.

The Symphony’s four movements are linked together through the use of a recurring “Fate” motto theme, given immediately at the beginning by unison clarinets as the brooding introduction to the first movement. The sonata form proper starts with a melancholy melody intoned by bassoon and clarinet over a stark string accompaniment. The woodwinds enter with wave-form scale patterns followed by a stentorian passage for the brass that leads to a climax. Several themes are presented to round out the exposition: a romantic tune, filled with emotional swells, for the strings; an aggressive strain given as a dialogue between winds and strings; and a languorous, sighing string melody. Again, the brasses are brought forth to climax this section. All of the themes are treated in the development section. The solo bassoon ushers in the recapitulation, and the themes from the exposition are heard again, though with changes of key and instrumentation. After a final climax in the coda, the movement fades, softer and slower, and sinks, finally, into the lowest reaches of the orchestra.

At the head of the manuscript of the second movement Tchaikovsky is said to have written, “Oh, how I love ... if you love me ...,” a sentiment that calls to mind an operatic love scene. (Tchaikovsky, it should be remembered, was a master of the musical stage who composed more operas than he did symphonies.) The expressiveness of the opening theme, hauntingly played by the solo horn, is heightened as the movement proceeds through enriched contrapuntal lines and instrumental sonorities. Twice, the imperious Fate motto intrudes upon the starlit mood of this *romanza*.

If the second movement derives from opera, the third grows from ballet. A flowing waltz melody (inspired by a street song Tchaikovsky had heard in Italy a decade earlier) dominates much of the movement. The central trio section exhibits a scurrying figure in the strings which shows the influence of Léo Delibes, the French master of ballet music whom Tchaikovsky deeply admired. Quietly and briefly, the Fate motto returns in the movement’s closing pages.

The finale begins with a long introduction based on the Fate theme cast in a heroic rather than a sinister or melancholy mood. A vigorous exposition, a concentrated development and an intense recapitulation follow. The long coda uses the motto theme in a major-key, victory-won setting. This stirring work ends with a final statement from the trumpets and horns, and closing chords from the full orchestra.

The Hansons characterized Tchaikovsky's Fifth Symphony in the following manner: "The Fifth Symphony is splendid music, grand and dignified, and its form expresses the content more satisfactorily than in any other of Tchaikovsky's large works for orchestra. But the final thought must be, as with so many of this composer's works, a thought transcending the obvious pleasure of tunefulness, superb orchestration, and passionate self-questioning; it is from first note to last noble. Never querulous, never playing to the gallery, it exposes the soul of a man which all must feel the better for knowing."