Minnesota Orchestra

Scott Yoo, conductor
Simon Trpčeski, piano

Friday, November 4, 2022, 8 pm | Orchestra Hall
Saturday, November 5, 2022, 8 pm | Orchestra Hall

Ulysses Kay
Concerto for Orchestra
Allegro moderato
Adagio
Andante

Peter Ilyich Tchaikovsky
Concerto No. 1 in B-flat minor for Piano and Orchestra, Opus 23
Allegro non troppo e molto maestoso
Andantino semplice
Allegro con fuoco
Simon Trpčeski, piano

INTERMISSION
ca. 20'

Béla Bartók
Music for Strings, Percussion and Celesta
Andante tranquillo
Allegro
Adagio
Allegro molto

Concert Preview with Phillip Gainsley and Scott Yoo
Friday, November 4, 7:15 pm, Target Atrium
Saturday, November 5, 7:15 pm, Target Atrium

Minnesota Orchestra concerts are broadcast live on Friday evenings on stations of YourClassical Minnesota Public Radio, including KSJN 99.5 FM in the Twin Cities.
Macedonian pianist Simon Trpčeski has established himself as one of the most remarkable musicians to have emerged in recent years. Launched onto the international scene 20 years ago as a BBC New Generation Artist, he has collaborated with over 100 orchestras on four continents, from New York and Los Angeles to London, Amsterdam, Seoul and Sydney. At his Minnesota Orchestra debut in 2015, he played Rachmaninoff’s Third Piano Concerto. His broad and award-winning discography includes repertoire such as Rachmaninoff’s complete works for piano and orchestra and the Prokofiev piano concertos as well as composers such as Poulenc, Debussy and Ravel. Variations, his latest solo album released in spring 2022, features works by Brahms, Beethoven and Mozart. Committed to strengthening the cultural image of his native country, his chamber music project MAKEDOMISSIMO is dedicated to introducing audiences worldwide to the rich traditional Macedonian folk roots. In 2009 he received the Presidential Order of Merit for Macedonia, and in 2011 he became the first-ever recipient of the title “National Artist of Macedonia.” More: cmartists.com, trpceski.com.

Scott Yoo, conductor

Scott Yoo has served as the chief conductor and artistic director of the Mexico City Philharmonic since 2016. Since 2004 he has been music director of Festival Mozaic, an orchestral and chamber music festival in California. He is also the host and executive producer of the PBS series Now Hear This, which received an Emmy nomination in 2021. He first collaborated with the Minnesota Orchestra in October 2021 for the first iteration of an annual series now called the Listening Project, conducting the first-ever professional recordings of five works, including one featured on this week’s concerts, Ulysses Kay’s Concerto for Orchestra. He has conducted many major orchestras in the U.S., Europe and Asia, and his discography includes over 20 recordings. A proponent of the music of our time, he has premiered 71 works by 38 composers. Born in Tokyo and now living in Connecticut, he began his musical studies at age 3, performed the Mendelssohn Violin Concerto with the Boston Symphony at age 12 and later won first prize in the 1988 Josef Gingold International Violin Competition, among other high honors. More: scott-woo.com, felsnerartists.com.

Kay: Concerto for Orchestra

Ulysses Kay’s Concerto for Orchestra—in which all of the ensemble’s instruments and sections engage in conversation, contrast and conflict—follows a fast-slow-fast form with some surprises thrown in, such as a ramping up in tempo and volume in the midst of a so-called Adagio movement and a surpising harmonic shift to the piece’s final chord.

Tchaikovsky: Piano Concerto No. 1

Like Beethoven, who angrily removed Napoleon’s name from his Eroica Symphony, Tchaikovsky furiously scratched out the name of the intended dedicatee of this famous concerto—and it became an instant success in the hands of the man he then honored with the dedication, Hans von Bülow. It begins with high drama, retreats to a place of calm and rushes toward its close in a mood of white-hot energy.

Bartók: Music for Strings, Percussion and Celesta

Bartók’s concept of positioning instrumentalists in exact locations across the stage means that where the sound comes from is an important part of this unusual music—with a singular instrumentation that spotlights the celesta, a small high-pitched keyboard instrument, while excluding winds and brass.
When a new orchestral work enters the world, its prospects of enjoying massive success are generally slim, since it is competing with centuries of entrenched favorites known as the “standard repertoire.” A few things can improve a new arrival’s odds of flourishing, such as a prominent premiere, rave reviews, sustained advocacy—perhaps by a conductor, performer, publisher or impresario—as well as a tool that was not widely available to orchestras until about a century ago.

**“a definite plus”**

“A record of the work is a definite plus,” commented the American composer Ulysses Kay in a 1985 interview with radio announcer Bruce Duffie. Only a small portion of his output, which numbers about 140 works ranging from piano solos to full-length operas, was put to disc and released commercially in his lifetime. Kay noted in the interview that those which were recorded, such as the Six Dances, received performances that would otherwise never have happened.

Beyond extending a composition’s reach, Kay mentioned another benefit of a new composition being recorded, rather than just performed: the quality of the work’s rendition. “Usually if they’re going to record, [the orchestra] will take some more time to prepare it, to rehearse it adequately, rather than as a first performance and good-bye [in which] they’ll just get through it,” he noted. “They’re aware of it being in a more permanent form, so they take pains.”

**ahead of his time**

In this interview, 36 years before the Minnesota Orchestra launched its Listening Project initiative in October 2021, Kay was foretelling its core aim: helping make masterful but overlooked compositions more widely known through the creation of high-quality professional recordings. In the Orchestra’s case, this new annual project is focused exclusively on music by composers from historically underrepresented and marginalized racial groups, with its first two editions collectively spotlighting 11 works by Black composers of the past and present. The Listening Project recordings are then made available at no cost so that other orchestras can more easily evaluate and program the works, and so listeners worldwide can enjoy the music.

One of the works recorded at the 2021 Listening Project sessions, which were played under the direction of this week’s conductor Scott Yoo, was Kay’s Concerto for Orchestra that dates from 1948. The three-movement composition actually was recorded previously, in 1953 by the Teatro La Fenice Symphony Orchestra, but on a relatively low-budget label called Remington Records. The concerto received a number of performances during the composer’s lifetime in the U.S., Canada and Europe, but the Minnesota Orchestra’s musicians and artistic leaders are hopeful that last year’s recording and the programming at this week’s subscription concerts will help popularize the work for a new era of listeners.

**a contradictory conception**

The idea of a concerto for orchestra is a clash with classical tradition: most concertos from the mid-1700s through the present comprise a large-scale dialogue between one solo instrument (occasionally two or very rarely a few more) and a large ensemble, with the solo part standing out in importance and virtuosity, and often given the solo spotlight in one or more cadenzas. Works titled Concerto for Orchestra, which began to proliferate in the 20th century, take other approaches—sometimes turning the composition into a series of mini-concertos featuring individual instruments and sections in conversation or conflict with the larger group, and with numerous parts written at a high degree of difficulty.

Kay’s Concerto for Orchestra, which received its premiere in Venice while the composer was living in Europe for much of the late 1940s and early ’50s, meets some of these criteria, though the writing is not quite as demanding as more famous concertos for orchestra such as Béla Bartók’s or Witold Lutosławski’s. Its three movements follow the basic fast-slow-fast form of a traditional concerto—but with some surprising deviations.

**allegro moderato.** The concerto’s energetic opening movement begins with the full ensemble playing melodies that contain wide leaps, then proceeds with passages scored for the wind, brass and string sections in turn. The three sections then converse in music of increasing complexity before a grandiose close.

**adagio.** The middle movement, labeled Adagio initially, begins softly, with lyrical wind and violin solo lines that seem to indicate a quiet and sparse movement. A surprising crescendo and accelerando belies the movement’s title; 16th notes and even more rapid quintuplet and sextuplet groupings break out before the slow, gentle mood returns.
when he commended the value of a "record" in the 1985 interview. method of distribution that the composer couldn’t have dreamed of of the Concerto for Orchestra, which was made without a live Year’s Eve concert in 2020. A year ago this month, subscription before selections from his Six Dances were played at a New York (CUNY). In a Minnesota connection, he was a Hubert H. Humphrey Lecturer at Macalester College in St. Paul in 1975.

The Minnesota Orchestra has previously performed only three of Kay's compositions in concert: after it programmed the Serenade for Orchestra in both 1968 and 1971, nearly a half-century passed before selections from his Six Dances were played at a New Year's Eve concert in 2020. A year ago this month, subscription concerts featured a suite of music from Kay's score to the 1948 documentary drama film The Quiet One. Last year's recording of the Concerto for Orchestra, which was made without a live audience, is available via the Orchestra's YouTube channel—a method of distribution that the composer couldn't have dreamed of when he commended the value of a “record” in the 1985 interview.

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**Peter Ilyich Tchaikovsky**

**Born:** May 7, 1840, Votkinsk, Russia  
**Died:** November 7, 1893, St. Petersburg, Russia

**Concerto No. 1 in B-flat minor for Piano and Orchestra, Opus 23**

**Premiered:** October 25, 1875

On Christmas Eve, 1874, Tchaikovsky sat before his friend, the conductor Nicolai Rubinstein, at the Moscow Conservatory to play for him the piano concerto he had almost completed. “I played the first movement. Not a single remark!...Then a torrent poured forth from Nicolai, gentle at first, then growing more and more into the sound of Jupiter....My concerto was worthless and unplayable.... The piece as a whole was bad, trivial, vulgar. I had stolen this from somebody and that from somebody else. It was so clumsy, so badly written that it was beyond rescue.”

Tchaikovsky’s description, sent to his patroness Mme. Von Meck, goes on at great length. Obviously, he was insulted and deeply hurt, but resolved to publish the concerto anyway. As a result of the bad feelings between Rubinstein and the composer, the dedication was changed to Hans von Bülow, who performed it on a tour of the United States. The world premiere, on October 25, 1875, took place then, not in Russia, but in Boston, from where Bülow sent what is thought to have been the first cable ever sent from Boston to Moscow, telling Tchaikovsky of the great popular success of his concerto.

Strange as it may seem, the critics did not agree with the public acclamation. The *Evening Transcript* thought it had “long stretches of what seems…formless void, sprinkled only with tinklings of the piano and snatchy obbligatos from all the various wind and string instruments in turn.” The *Journal* was confident that “it would not soon supplant…the fiery compositions of Liszt, Raff and [Anton] Rubinstein,” and *Dwight's Journal of Music* found it “strange, wild, and ultra-modern,” and wondered “could we ever learn to love such music?” History has decided resolutely in favor of the question, and the work went on to become the world’s most popular piano concerto. Tchaikovsky’s original confidence had borne fruit. Even Nicolai Rubinstein changed his mind in later years and performed...
unique charms and a famous introduction

Each of the three movements has its unique charms and attractions. The concerto's most famous theme—that beautiful, lyrical song played by violins just after the opening horn fanfare—is used as introductory material only, and after it has run its course of development through various instruments, never returns. This theme, incidentally, occurs in the key of D-flat major, not the main key of the concerto, B-flat minor. As this is the tune most of us remember most about the concerto, it is worth recalling the late Michael Steinberg's comments about it: "The effect [of the crashing piano chords] is splendid, it is even exciting to watch, and it makes much more of Tchaikovsky's bold idea of having the first solo entrance be an accompaniment—but what an accompaniment!" The first movement's true principal subject is a jerky, almost tuneless idea introduced by the soloist in the concerto's nominal key of B-flat minor. Its essential folk character can be detected if the individual pitches are sung slowly. (It is actually a Ukrainian song traditionally sung by seekers of charity.)

The dreamy flute solo that opens the second movement also exudes a folksy flavor, but in this case it is entirely Tchaikovsky's own. This slow movement incorporates what is in essence a miniature Scherzo movement—a prestissimo passage of whimsical, lighthearted fun. (Steinberg describes it as "something akin to a waltz at about triple speed.") It features a lilting tune in the strings that Tchaikovsky borrowed from a French chansonnette.

The finale offers the most brilliant virtuosic opportunities yet. Again, we find a Ukrainian folk song used as the basis of the first theme. A lyrical second theme soon follows. The concerto concludes with the soloist roaring her way up and down the keyboard in a stunning display of pianistic pyrotechnics guaranteed to elicit thunderous applause from a supercharged audience. Small wonder that at the premiere in Boston, and at subsequent performances in Bülow's American tour, audiences demanded the entire movement to be encored.

**Instrumentation:** solo piano with orchestra comprising 2 flutes, 2 oboes, 2 clarinets, 2 bassoons, 4 horns, 2 trumpets, 3 trombones, timpani and strings

Program note by Robert Markow.
across a varied landscape to as exciting and cathartic a finale as he ever wrote.

**The Music**

*Andante tranquillo.* Bartók chooses that most disciplined of forms, the fugue, for the first movement. The somber subject (announced by muted violas and developed exclusively by the strings) divides into four brief rising-and-falling phrases. Bartók changes meter almost every measure, so the sense of a downbeat or natural phrase unit is obliterated. Bartók’s control is absolute. There are no interludes, no counterthemes, and the fugue reaches its climax, then breaks off in silence.

The return is almost more impressive than the fugue itself. Bartók reduces his theme to fragments, inverts them and telescopes their entries. The music winds into silence as two violin sections offer a mirror-image cadence that slowly and precisely lands on a unison A, the pitch at which the fugue began. Mere words do not begin to describe the impact of this music, which is powerful precisely because it is so controlled: it begins in near silence, and Bartók gradually unleashes a searing energy that flames to life, then recovers it, and—like a genie driven back into its lamp—the music vanishes at just the spot where it had come to life.

**Allegro.** After such intensity, some release is necessary. The second movement deploys two string orchestras antiphonally (they had been tightly woven together in the first movement) and uses the rest of the percussion, which had sat silent through the fugue. Here is another quite traditional structure—a sonata-form movement in C major—and Bartók quickly has the music ricocheting across the stage as the two string orchestras take bits of it up in turn. Only gradually does the ear recognize that their sharply-inflected music is a variation of the opening fugue subject. Every sonata-form movement needs a second subject, and here it shows up in the classically-correct dominant, G major (Haydn and Mozart would have approved). After a clearly defined recapitulation, the movement—full of energy, humor and sounds in motion—concludes riotously.

**Adagio.** Here is the classic example of a Bartók “night-music movement” (though it should be noted that, in its dark colors and somber expression, the work’s opening fugue is also a night-music movement). The form here is a great deal more free: it falls into five brief sections, all linked by ominous fragments of the fugue theme. Here, more than in any other movement, Bartók explores the range of sounds available within his choice of instruments. The *Adagio* opens with the clink of solo xylophone, which gives way to the uneasy swoop of timpani glissandos. The violas’ *parlando* entrance (imitating the rhythms and sounds of speech) launches the sequence of episodes, which run from icy swirls through great snapped-off chords.