

TCHAKOVSKY & SHAKESPEARE

January 20, 2023 • 8:00 PM

Featuring:
Yaniv Dinur, conductor

This program does not include an intermission.

PROKOFIEV

Symphony No. 1 in D Major, Op.25 "Classical"

(15')*

Allegro

Larghetto

Gavotte: Non troppo allegro

Finale: Molto vivace

SILVESTROV

Hymn – 2001

(7')*

TCHAIKOVSKY

Romeo and Juliet Fantasy - Overture

(19')*

Program subject to change.

*indicates approximate performance duration

Symphony No. 1 in D Major, Op. 25 “Classical”

Sergei Prokofiev

(b. Sontsovka, Ekaterinoslav, 1891 / d. Moscow, 1953)

First performed: April 21, 1918, in St. Petersburg

Last ESO performance: January 2016

One hears from the very opening measures of this work the cheerfulness of it all, and the cheeky nod to the works of composers such as Haydn and Mozart. But underneath the wit and good humour of Prokofiev's *First Symphony* are the seeds of harmony and architecture that can be found even in the composer's most serious and mature works. It should be noted this was no student work – Prokofiev turned 27 less than a week after the work premiered in 1918.

“It seemed to me that had Haydn lived to our day he would have retained his own style while accepting something of the new at the same time,” Prokofiev wrote. “That was the kind of symphony I wanted to write.” And in four brief movements (the entire work lasts scarcely more than 15 minutes), that's what he does. The opening movement has the lines of a classical work, with quirky and unexpected harmonies and punctuations. The slow movement is a gentle, almost romantic Larghetto. The short gavotte in the third movement is one, in the words of music scholar David Fanning, “whereby harmony side-slips only to be picked up by the scruff of the neck and put back on the right track.” Like the first movement, the finale is also in sonata form, though this one much more effervescent and convivial.

Hymn – 2001

Valentin Silvestrov

(b. Kyiv, 1937)

First performed: April 15, 2001, in Kyiv

This the ESO premiere of the piece

Born in 1937, the Ukrainian Valentin Silvestrov may be counted alongside his contemporaries Arvo Pärt and Giya Kancheli as among the most profoundly spiritual composers from the former Soviet republics. Silvestrov, however, distinguishes himself from those contemporaries by the sharpness of his ears and the freshness of his thinking. Many of his works could be considered either neoclassical (a modern understanding of classical forms – tonight's symphony by Prokofiev could be considered an example) and post-modernist (a bit of an elusive term, denoting a turning away from aspects of modern art). Still, the composer has insisted, “I do not write new music. My music is a response to and an echo of what already exists.” He does this by his use of traditional tonal and modal techniques, creating a singular blend of both dramatic and emotional textures, qualities that he suggests are otherwise sacrificed in much of contemporary music.

Hymn – 2001 was composed in 1999 and dedicated to Giya Kancheli. This work is a noble song of praise with expands outward tonally and harmonically. “My hymn is enveloped in silence although it appears like a customary string setting on the outside,” he writes. “The paradox of Cage's ('4:33') is also present in latent form, but this is the 'silence of new music.' All melodic content from my other compositions can also be found here. A rest does not only constitute a lack of sound but is also a state of [slowing down] and paralysis or a suspension of time. In early music, there was an occasional need for silence, but here it is a fundamental feature.”

Romeo and Juliet Fantasy - Overture

Piotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky

(b. Kamsko-Votkinsk, 1840 / d. St. Petersburg, 1893)

First performed: March 28, 1870, in Moscow

Last ESO performance: November 2016

While the tragic story of the Veronese lovers Romeo and Juliet seems a natural fit to the particular artistic temperament of Tchaikovsky, it was in fact the composer's friend and fellow composer Mili Balakirev who was the main driving force behind the work. Yet Balakirev proved one of the work's harshest critics, at least in its early guises. And while Tchaikovsky typically proved stubborn in the face of his colleagues' criticisms, after the work was first performed to a lacklustre reception, he actually took many of Balakirev's comments to heart, and embarked on an extensive revision of the piece, presented in its final version 10 years later, changed from an overture to what was now called a "fantasy overture."

The work does not follow any specific program or sequence of events. Instead, Tchaikovsky, with that sense of mood and gift for melody that was so uniquely his, perfectly captures all the emotions of Shakespeare's first tragedy – and does so within the strictures of classical sonata form. The opening theme, suggesting Friar Laurence with its hymn-like nature, is the slow introduction. This is followed by the exposition of the two main subjects of the overture. There is the fiery conflict of the two feuding families, and the theme of the lovers themselves – one of the most heart-tuggingly romantic themes in all of music. There is a short recapitulation, concluding with a brief funeral march, before the epic now world-famous theme of the lovers returns in a glorious climax.

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