Chicago Symphony Program Notes for Tchaikovsky's Program Piano Concerto no. 2 in g major, op. 44

Philip Huscher

Late in 1879, with his first piano concerto already well on its way to surpassing popularity, Tchaikovsky felt unproductive and restless. "Today," he wrote to his brother Modest on October 22, "I began to create something, and the boredom vanished as if by magic." This was the start of his second piano concerto. Now convinced that he was a workaholic—though not of the 24/7 variety; he tended to work only in the mornings— Tchaikovsky threw himself into his new project and finished the sketches for the first movement little more than a week later. By mid-December, he had drafted the other two movements as well— writing the finale before the slow movement—in each case, finding that once he got started, the ideas flowed freely. He began to luxuriate in the creative process: "I work with pleasure," he wrote to Madame von Meck, "and I am also trying to curb the habitual haste that has so often been damaging to my efforts."

The new concerto was composed wherever Tchaikovsky's travels took him—Berlin, Paris, Rome—as well as at home in Russia, where he finished the orchestration in the spring of 1880. The world premiere was given in November 1881 in New York City—six years after the First Piano Concerto had been given its first performance in Boston. (The conductor was Theodore Thomas, who would become the first music director of the new Chicago Symphony a decade later.) Even then, the popularity of the *First Piano Concerto* stood in the way of an unbiased appraisal of the Second. *The New York Times* was cool and dismissive, and, in Boston two months later, where the premiere of the first concerto had already become the stuff of legend, the new piece was, by comparison, found "wearisome." Audiences at the Moscow premiere in May 1882 were enthusiastic, standing and cheering at the end, but even there the critics raised reservations.

Tchaikovsky was incensed, confident that he had not only provided a worthy sequel to the *First*, but a work of greater architectural integrity and bold new features, such as the extensive solos for violin and cello in the slow movement, nearly turning it temporarily into a triple concerto. When Taneyev, who played the Moscow premiere, wrote to thank Tchaikovsky for the opportunity, he could not help grumbling that the first two movements were too long and that the all-important piano part got lost in the "trio" of the middle movement. Tchaikovsky's response is a model of scarcely concealed ire, thanking Taneyev for his "superb performance of the concerto in its present, so imperfect form."

But when Tchaikovsky himself conducted performances in Saint Petersburg late in 1888, he made a number of revisions to the score, obviously having taken the criticism to heart. Around the same time, Tchaikovsky's former student, Alexander Siloti, began a more extensive, often insensitive revision of the score—the cadenza was lifted intact and moved to the very end of the first movement—without the composer's permission. "I am grateful to you for your concern and interest, for your desire that my pieces should be made easier and more rewarding" Tchaikovsky shot back, "but emphatically I can't agree with your cuts and especially with your reordering of the first movement." Nevertheless, that was not the end of the matter—just three months before his death, Tchaikovsky was still arguing with

Siloti over these issues—and with the score that was printed after the composer died, Siloti finally got his way. As a result, the version of the Second Piano Concerto that is still often performed is a mutilated score Tchaikovsky would hardly have recognized as his own. We have since learned—most dramatically from the experience of restoring Bruckner's symphonies to their original dimensions—that cutting expansive works of music doesn't necessarily make them seem shorter, simply choppier and more chaotically structured. (Bruckner and Tchaikovsky are contemporaries; Bruckner's Fourth Symphony and Tchaikovsky's Second Piano Concerto both had their premieres in 1881.) This week's performances return to Tchaikovsky's original intentions, proving that Siloti's corrective surgery was not only unnecessary and largely botched, but that it has not held up well over time.

The drama of Tchaikovsky's opening movement is created more by keeping the piano and orchestra apart than pitting them against each other. Later, while he was working on the Concert Fantasy, Tchaikovsky made an offhand remark that he disliked the sound of piano and orchestra together. That instinct clearly explains the design of his unorthodox development section here, written in two large chapters for orchestra, each followed by a piano cadenza.

The remarkable slow movement finds yet a different way around the conventions of concerto form with its unusual and unexpected scoring for piano trio—solo violin, cello, and piano—and orchestra. In its own way, Tchaikovsky's decision to open this movement with an expansive solo for violin, continued by the solo cello, must have seemed as startling to audiences then as had Beethoven's idea to open his Fourth Piano Concerto with piano alone. Eventually the piano enters and all three soloists share the material, but the piano never really steals the spotlight, even in the cadenza. Only in the haunting final pages, when the violin and cello discreetly step aside, does Tchaikovsky seem to acknowledge that he is, after all, writing a piano concerto.

Under the circumstances, the dancelike finale seems particularly straightforward, but Tchaikovsky understood that after so much novelty and structural ingenuity, it was high time for traditional gestures and fireworks.