

Program Notes from the Grant Park Music Festival by Dr. Richard Rodda

PIANO CONCERTO NO. 2 IN G MAJOR, OP. 44 (1879-1880)

Peter Ilyich Tchaikovsky (1840-1893)

Tchaikovsky's Piano Concerto No. 2 is scored for pairs of woodwinds, four horns, two trumpets, timpani and strings. The performance time is 37 minutes. This is the first performance of the work by the Grant Park Orchestra.

In October 1879, during a lull in his work schedule following the completion of the Fourth Symphony and the Violin Concerto, Tchaikovsky wrote to his brother Modeste from his sister's country home in Kamenka, "These last few days I've experienced a certain vague dissatisfaction with myself, an over-frequent and almost irresistible desire to sleep, a certain emptiness and ultimately *boredom*.... Finally yesterday it became fully apparent to me what was the matter. I had to get on with something: I find myself absolutely incapable of living long without work. Today I began to create something, and the *boredom* vanished as if by magic. I have begun to compose a piano concerto." Though he admitted to working on the new piece only in the mornings, devoting the rest of the day to reading and

long walks, he finished the sketch of the large first movement by November 1st.

In early November, Tchaikovsky stopped in Moscow to transact some business with his publisher before traveling on to Paris, where he resumed work on the gestating concerto. The finale was finished first, then the *Andante*, and on December 15th, he wrote to his patroness, Mme. von Meck, "My Concerto is ready in the rough, and I am very pleased with it." He moved on to Rome soon thereafter, where he made a transcription of the work for two pianos before undertaking the orchestration in February; the score was completed on May 10th. Nikolai Rubinstein, who had recanted of his earlier scathing criticism of Tchaikovsky's Piano Concerto No. 1 to the point of taking the work into his repertory by 1879, agreed to introduce the new composition the following year. Rubinstein died in Paris on March 23, 1880, however, and the solo part was entrusted to Sergei Taneyev, Tchaikovsky's favorite pupil, who performed the Concerto at the first concert of the Industrial and Cultural Exhibition in Moscow on May 18, 1882; Anton Rubinstein, Nicholas' brother, conducted. The delay allowed the world premiere of the Second Concerto to take place in New York, where the Philharmonic Society played it under the direction of Theodore Thomas on November 12, 1881 with Madeleine Schiller as soloist. (Remarkably, the First Piano Concerto was also premiered in this country, by Hans von Bülow in Boston on October 25, 1875.)

The Concerto's opening movement is a vast sonata structure on three subjects: a martial first theme, a lyrical contrasting melody initiated by the clarinet and horn, and a melancholy strain comprising short orchestral fragments heavily decorated by the piano. The movement contains two solo cadenzas, both placed, most unusually, in the development section. The second one, as in Mendelssohn's Violin Concerto, also serves as the bridge to the recapitulation. The *Andante* is a large three-part form (A-B-A) which, with its prominent solos for violin and cello, is a virtual triple concerto. The finale is a rousing virtuoso display piece disposed in a loose sonata structure.