

Madison Symphony Orchestra Program Notes
February 17-18-19, 2017
91st Season / Subscription Concert No.5
Michael Allsen

This is a season of “firsts” for the Madison Symphony Orchestra—with many works appearing for the first time at our concerts—and this program opens with two of them. Barber’s *Second Essay* is a dramatic work written in the midst of World War II. The *Piano Concerto No.5* of Saint-Saëns, his final piano concerto, is a work that channels musical influences that were thrillingly exotic when it was written in 1896. It is played here by Stephen Hough, who is making his fourth appearance with the MSO, previously performing in 1998 (Rachmaninoff, *Concerto No.1*), 2004 (Saint-Saëns, *Concerto No.4*), and 2010 (Tchaikovsky, *Concerto No.1*). We end with the final work of Tchaikovsky, his emotionally devastating and deeply autobiographical sixth symphony.

Samuel Barber (1910-1981)
Second Essay for Orchestra, Op.17

The Second Essay for Orchestra was composed in 1942. The premiere was on April 16, 1942, with the New York Philharmonic, led by Bruno Walter. This is our first performance of the work. Duration 11:00.

In the 1940s, Barber was one of a new generation of American composers—Hanson, Copland, Diamond, and later Bernstein—whose works were being programmed with increasing frequency by the world’s great orchestras. Barber in particular was championed by several of the period’s preeminent conductors. In 1937, Artur Rodzinski conducted Barber’s *Symphony No.1* at the Salzburg Festival—the first American work to be performed there. The aging maestro Arturo Toscanini heard the symphony at Salzburg and asked Barber for a new work, to be played by the newly-organized NBC Symphony Orchestra. Barber responded with not one, but two new pieces, the famous *Adagio for Strings*, and his *[First] Essay for Orchestra*. Another distinguished conductor who was impressed by Barber was Bruno Walter, who would eventually record the *Symphony No.1* (the *only* work by an American composer recorded by Walter), and who commissioned a new orchestral work for the New York Philharmonic. The result was the *Second Essay*.

The ideal literary essay is brief and economical, treating a single subject. The title *Essay* allows a certain freedom of form within a musical work, but the *Second*

Essay fits the literary definition perfectly. All of its various melodic ideas are derived from a single theme, spun out by the solo flute. It also derives a number of distinct moods from this material—sometimes with great vehemence. (A few months after the premiere, Barber wrote that: “Although it has no program, one perhaps hears that it was written in war-time.”) The first idea, quietly introduced by solo woodwinds builds to a gentle climax in the full strings. The second theme, melodically similar to the first, is built up rather quickly to a strident brass passage. A sudden crisp chord breaks the mood the clarinet begins an intense fugue—in several keys at once—that eventually gives way to an angry scherzo. The *Second Essay* ends with broad hymn, first in the strings, and then even more dramatically in the brass.

Camille Saint-Saëns (1835-1921)

Concerto No.5 in F Major for Piano and Orchestra, Op.103 (“Egyptian”)

Saint-Saëns composed this concerto in the winter of 1895-96, and he was the soloist at the premiere, in Paris on May 6, 1896. This is our first performance of the work. Duration 30:00.

By 1895, sixty-year-old Saint-Saëns was the Grand Old Man of French music. His output as a composer had slowed slightly, but he was still prolific as a conservative and sometimes acerbic music critic, as an editor, as a conductor, and as an acclaimed piano soloist, noted for the cool and effortless elegance of his technique. He had received an honorary doctorate from Cambridge University in 1893—only one of dozens of international honors and awards that were lavished on Saint-Saëns in these years. If his music was not as popular as it once had been in France, he was wildly successful in England and the United States. (Though many folks begin to relax when they reach this point in life, Saint-Saëns continued to work successfully in all sides of his career for more than a quarter of a century after his sixtieth birthday!)

On May 6, 1846, Saint-Saëns made his piano debut as ten-year-old prodigy at a concert in Paris’s famed Salle Pleyel. When the Salle Pleyel announced that it would stage a grand concert in May 1896 to celebrate the fiftieth anniversary of his debut, Saint-Saëns began work on a new work for the concert—his first new piano concerto in twenty years. Most of the concerto was composed while he was on winter vacation in the Egyptian temple city of Luxor. The location is partly responsible for the popular nickname for this work, but the concerto also incorporated Egyptian and other exotic musical influences. It was a great success when he performed it at the Salle Pleyel, and it remains a popular concerto today.

The relaxed opening movement (*Allegro animato*) begins with a calm main theme laid out and promptly varied by the piano. After a short transition, the piano introduces a haunting, limpid second idea. Many of Saint-Saëns's concertos open with a movement in a fairly rigorous sonata form, but he adopts a freer approach to developing his themes here. The piano writing in the movement is passionate but restrained throughout, often in close conversation with the orchestra—he saves the fireworks for later.

Most of the musical exoticism in the concerto is reserved for the *Andante*. Paris at the time was fascinated by Middle Eastern and Oriental art, and Saint-Saëns slipped in reference to Egyptian, North African, and even Javanese music—including a rather prominent part for the gong for good measure. He later described the movement as a “journey to the East and even, in the passage in F-sharp, to the Far East.” After a bold introduction with a distinctly Middle Eastern sound, strings and piano which the composer borrowed from “a Nubian love song which I heard sung by boatmen on the Nile as I myself went down the river in a *dahabieh*.” Again the form of the movement is rather free, and he follows this with a kind of Moorish dance, and a brief dissonant moment that evokes Javanese gamelan music—his “passage in F-sharp.” The movement ends quietly and mysteriously.

According to Saint-Saëns the relatively brief and flashy finale (*Molto allegro*) described “the joy of a sea-crossing,” and it takes very little imagination to hear the throbbing of a ship's engines in the opening music, and a storm at sea in the middle of the movement. The piano line is virtuosic and forceful throughout, culminating in an exuberant flourish at the very end.

Peter Ilyich Tchaikovsky (1840-1893)
Symphony No. 6 in B minor, Op. 74 (Pathétique)

The Symphony No.6 was written between February and August 1893, and was first played in St. Petersburg on October 28, 1893, with Tchaikovsky himself conducting. It has been played seven times by the Madison Symphony Orchestra, beginning in 1945, and most recently in 2008. Duration 45:00.

“You can't imagine what bliss I feel, being convinced that my time is not yet passed and I can still work. Perhaps, of course, I'm mistaken, but I don't think so.”

- Tchaikovsky (to his nephew)

Tchaikovsky's late symphonies are autobiography of the most revealing kind. This was a man who felt and suffered deeply, and those feelings—fear, guilt, insecurity, and occasionally joy—came though most clearly in these works. The idea of Fate figures prominently in the programs of the fourth and fifth symphonies. The fourth (1877) seems to be a titanic battle with Fate, most likely occasioned by his feelings of guilt and inadequacy after his short-lived marriage and the increasing realization of his own homosexuality. The fifth (1888) is also a symphony about Fate, but here the relationship is more comfortable, or at least resigned. A decade after the fourth, Tchaikovsky had probably come to terms with his homosexuality, and although he still felt guilt pangs, his acceptance was accompanied by a deepening religious conviction and renewed confidence. A clear sense of this self-assurance comes through in the symphony's triumphant finale.

None of the late symphonies is surrounded by more mystique than the sixth, however. This is his last major work, and it was written after a protracted depression. The optimism of the late 1880s collapsed when his longtime patroness and confidant Nadezhda von Meck severed their relationship in 1890. Though he was no longer financially dependent on her, his correspondence with von Meck had obviously been an emotional support—she had been the one person to whom he could open his heart, even though they never spoke in person. Even artistic success and international fame was not enough. On a fabulously successful American tour in 1891, he wrote in his diary about feeling old and washed out: “I feel that something within me has gone to pieces.” By the beginning of 1893, he had hit bottom, writing to his nephew Vladimir Davidov on February 9 that: “What I need is to believe in myself again, for my faith has been greatly undermined. It seems to me that my role is over.” Within two weeks, he reported back excitedly to the same nephew that he was composing “furiously.” By August, when the *Symphony No.6* was nearly complete, he wrote again, calling it “the best, and certainly the most open-hearted of my works.” The supreme irony of this work is that, only nine days after he conducted its successful premiere in St. Petersburg, Tchaikovsky was dead. The old story about his death from cholera seems to be a fabrication, covering up what was almost certainly suicide. The precise details of his death remain a mystery, but one story that came to light in 1966 connects the death to a romantic relationship between the composer and the nephew of a Russian noble. Such things were kept out of the public eye, but Tchaikovsky was supposedly convicted by a “court of honor” comprised of his noble peers, and told to kill himself to avoid embarrassment for all concerned.

Given the biographical circumstances of this symphony, Tchaikovsky's intended meaning is significant in how we hear it. Its pessimistic tone, and elements like the

quotation of a chant from the Orthodox service for the dead, show that death was probably on his mind. This is clearly a symphony with a message—it was billed as *A Program Symphony* at its first performance, and in a letter to his nephew, he described it as: “a work with a program, but a program of a kind which remains an enigma to all—let them guess it who can.” Modeste Tchaikovsky, who composed a sort of biographical program for the *Symphony No.6* after his brother’s death, maintained that the secret died with the composer. However, some clue of his intentions may lie in a brief note found among the sketches for his *Nutcracker* ballet, written a year earlier:

“Following is the plan for a symphony LIFE! First movement—all impulse, confidence, thirst for activity. Must be short (Finale death—result of collapse). Second movement love; third movement disappointment; fourth ends with a dying away (also short).”

It is hard to escape the conclusion that the *Symphony No.6* is autobiographical, the work of a deeply sad man. The title was not Tchaikovsky’s own: *Pathétique*, not simply “pathetic” as usually understood, but rather implying poignancy and deep sorrow. His brother Modeste suggested the title (*Patetichesky*) the day after the premiere as a replacement for the composer’s own enigmatic *Program Symphony*, and Tchaikovsky appended it when he mailed the score to his publisher Jurgenson. The day after he mailed the score, he wrote a second letter to Jurgenson rejecting the title, but he was dead a week later and the publisher kept Modeste’s title, which has remained with the work ever since.

In his letters, Tchaikovsky promised “much innovation of form” in the *Symphony No.6*, and the opening movement certainly lives up to this. Dispensing with the usual conventions, he presents three closely related ideas: first a doleful bassoon melody, which gives way to a faster version of the same idea in the violas. A descending line at the end of this section is transformed into the lush second theme in the strings. After an ascending answer in the woodwinds, the second theme enters again in fuller form. The music dies away—literally: never one for understatement, Tchaikovsky writes the seemingly impossible dynamic marking *pppppp* (*pianisissississimo!*) at the close of the exposition. The development begins with a crashing chord from the full orchestra (merely *ff* — *ffff* comes later...). After a fierce *fugato*, the bassoons and low brass solemnly intone a chant from the Russian Orthodox mass for the dead (“With your saints, O Christ, may the soul of the departed rest in peace”). There is no regular recapitulation, but instead a continuation of the furious motion of the development, following on the heels of this chant. When it reappears, the second theme is underlaid with a nervous

accompanimental figure. The movement fades away with quiet woodwind statements above descending pizzicato notes from the strings.

Innovation continues in the second movement (*Allegro con grazia*), a kind of waltz set in 5/4. This meter was almost unheard of in orchestral music at the time, and can often sound awkward and off-balanced. Tchaikovsky's melodies, however, flow so naturally that this odd metrical arrangement is scarcely noticeable. The movement is cast as an alternation between the gentle, lilting "waltz" and a more pensive trio.

The third movement (*Allegro molto vivace*) is a march, but this is not clear for quite a while. Quick triplet figures are tossed off between strings and woodwinds as tiny fragments of a march theme gradually emerge. When the march itself finally appears, some 70 bars into the movement, it is quietly stated by the clarinets, and then again by the strings. There is a brief crescendo, but the dynamic backs off again and the strings and woodwinds introduce a countertheme. The march theme begins again, still under tight control, and there is a lengthy section where tension builds to the breaking point before the seemingly inevitable statement by full orchestra. The movement closes triumphantly with a descending line in the brass and a triplet flourish.

After the noisy bombast of the march, the tragic character of the finale comes as a complete surprise. The main theme is given immediately by the strings, and then again with slightly augmented orchestration, rounded off by a melancholy bassoon solo. The second theme moves to a somewhat brighter major key, and the mood intensifies until an ominous strike of the gong. The music builds to one more peak before silenced again by the gong and a dark trombone and tuba chorale. As if exhausted, the movement quickly dies away to nothingness.