

NOTE: complete notes are forthcoming after January 2027.

Madison Symphony Orchestra Program Notes

by J. Michael Allsen

Subscription Program No. 7 – Tchaikovsky Violin Concerto

April 9-10-11, 2027

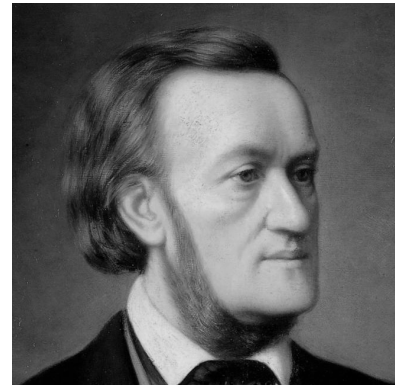
This program opens with the expressive *Prelude and Liebestod* from Richard Wagner's great music-drama *Tristan und Isolde*. We then welcome Blake Pouliot back to center stage at Overture Hall. This dynamic young Canadian violinist has previously appeared with the Madison Symphony Orchestra in 2000 (Mendelssohn *Violin Concerto*) in 2023 (Saint-Saëns, *Violin Concerto No. 3*). Here, he performs the grand, romantic *Violin Concerto* by Tchaikovsky. After intermission, we have a new work by Madison's own Scott Gendel, *Spacious Skies: A Choral Symphony*. Gendel's music is already familiar to MSO audiences, and his deeply moving *Everlasting Faint* was premiered by the Madison Opera last season. This is a celebration of America's National Parks, hailed by Wallace Stegner as "the best idea we've ever had." The libretto was written by Caitlyn Vincent. Joining the orchestra for this world premiere are soprano Katerina Burton, mezzo-soprano. Rihanna Thelwell, bass-baritone Kyle Keteleson, Madison Youth Choirs, and the Madison Symphony Chorus.

The *Prelude to "Tristan und Isolde"* was premiered some six years before the opera itself.

Richard Wagner

Born: May 22, 1813, Leipzig, Germany.

Died: February 13, 1883, Venice, Italy.



Prelude and Liebestod from "Tristan und Isolde"

- **Composed:** 1857-1859.
- **Premiere:** The excerpts heard on this program were played publicly before the opera's premiere in 1865: Hans von Bülow conducted the *Prelude* in late 1859, while Wagner led an 1863 performance of the *Prelude and Liebestod* in Vienna.
- **Previous MSO Performances:** 1931, 1949, 1960, 1967, 1975, 2002, and 2013.
- **Duration:** 17:00.

Tristan und Isolde is a story of forbidden love—that transcends even death.

Background

Wagner wrote *Tristan und Isolde*—his retelling of a medieval Celtic epic—between 1857 and 1859, but it took some six years for his “music drama” to reach the stage. Wagner’s original intention was to create a “thoroughly workable” music-drama, which could be staged more efficiently than operatic juggernauts like *The Flying Dutchman* or *Tannhäuser*. His imagination overstepped these bounds, however—he wrote to a friend in 1860: “upon rereading it, I couldn’t believe my eyes or ears... I’ve overstepped whatever lies with the powers of execution.” One example of the formidable technical challenges of *Tristan und Isolde* is the great love-duet of Act II, where the title characters need to sing at full volume for some fifteen minutes...while lying down! After two failed attempts to produce the opera, Wagner gained the support of the eighteen-year-old Ludwig II of Bavaria, who sponsored the first staging in 1865, at the Royal Theater in Munich.

The *Prelude* and *Liebestod* constitute the beginning and final scene of Wagner’s music drama. The main themes are *Leitmotifs*, representing elements of what is going on onstage.

What You’ll Hear

As in his other operatic preludes, *Tristan*’s opening brings together several of Wagner’s *Leitmotifs*—musical phrases he used to represent people, emotions, and even objects from the drama. The interplay of these musical ideas often displays the hidden drama going on beneath what is happening on stage. In *Tristan*’s *Prelude*, the most prominent *Leitmotif* is the “confession of love” heard in the opening bars. Immediately on the heels of this tonally ambiguous passage comes the motive of “desire” played by the oboe—the famously unresolved “Tristan chord.” It is this conflict, between forbidden love and frankly sexual desire that provides the driving force behind the opera.

In the opera, the *Prelude* leads directly to the sailor’s song that opens Act I, but it soon took on a life of its own as a concert piece. It is occasionally performed with the “concert ending” Wagner composed for the 1859 premiere, but it is more often paired with the opera’s closing scene, the *Liebestod* (Love-death). On the concert stage, this scene is performed either with soprano solo, or—as on this program—as a purely orchestral piece.

The *Liebestod*—more properly known as “Isolde’s Transfiguration”—comes at the very end of this love-story. Tristan’s original mission had been to bring Isolde to

the court of his uncle, King Marke, where she would become Queen. The two fall into a forbidden love by way of a love potion and by Act III, Tristan lies mortally wounded because of their affair. Isolde, summoned to heal Tristan, arrives just in time to hold him as he dies. In the end, she wills herself to die—the *Liebestod*—so she might join him. Here, the “desire” *Leitmotif* combines with “ecstasy” as the music moves towards a tremendous peak before subsiding quietly to an echo of the opening bars...in which, after more than three hours on the operatic stage, the “Tristan chord” is finally resolved!

The *Violin Concerto* came out of a turbulent time in Tchaikovsky’s life.

Peter Ilyich Tchaikovsky

Born: May 7, 1840, Votkinsk, Russia.

Died: November 6, 1893, St. Petersburg, Russia.



Concerto in D Major for Violin and Orchestra, Op. 35

- **Composed:** March and April of 1878.
- **Premiere:** Adolf Brodsky was the soloist at the premiere performance in Vienna, on December 4, 1881.
- **Previous MSO Performances:** 1939 (George Szpinalski), 1964 (Won-Mo Kim), 1978 (Kyung-Wha Chung), 1986 (Miriam Fried), 2001 (Nadja Salerno-Sonnenberg), 2011 (Henning Kraggerud), and 2018 (Gil Shaham).
- **Duration:** 38:00.

Though it is now recognized as one of the great romantic violin works, it faced a great deal of resistance early on.

Background

In the spring of 1877, when he was hard at work on sketches for his fourth symphony and doing preliminary work on his opera *Eugene Onegin*, Tchaikovsky received an increasingly passionate series of love letters from Antonina Milyukova, a conservatory student, and eventually a marriage proposal. Just why Tchaikovsky—hardly a completely balanced individual in his own right—impetuously agreed to this marriage remains something of a mystery, though he may have wanted to silence nasty whisperings about his homosexuality. Whatever the reason, this marriage was an unmitigated disaster for both of them. Within a few days of the wedding, Tchaikovsky found Antonina’s presence unbearable and fled Moscow, and a few months later he attempted suicide. Failing suicide, he left

again, now to St. Petersburg, where doctors recommended a permanent separation from his wife and a change of scenery. Financial support from Madame von Meck allowed him to retreat to the small Swiss town of Clarens in October, and he stayed away from Russia for nearly six months.

The composer forged another, much more positive relationship with a woman in 1877. Nadezdha von Meck was an enormously wealthy widow who became attracted to Tchaikovsky's music and began to write to him in that same year. Tchaikovsky eagerly seized upon this relationship, and for the next fourteen years they carried on a deeply personal correspondence, each sharing their most innermost thoughts with the other. They purposely never met one another in person—it is reported that they did run into one another by chance on at least two occasions but never spoke. She would play a major background role in the composition of his *Violin Concerto*.

Like Tchaikovsky, the violinist Yosif Yosifevitch Kotek received patronage from Madame von Meck—Kotek was also a former student of Tchaikovsky's and had been instrumental in orchestrating the relationship between the composer and his patroness. It is also likely that he and Tchaikovsky had been romantically involved at some point. At von Meck's urging, Kotek visited Tchaikovsky in Switzerland in March of 1878. The composer was obviously glad to see a familiar and friendly face, but he was also inspired by their informal performances together, most particularly Lalo's virtuoso showpiece *Capriccio Espagnol*. On March 17, he began to work on a violin concerto. He composed at a furious pace, with advice from Kotek on technical details, and completed a sketch version in only 11 days. The complete score was finished just two weeks later, on April 11.

Though it seems hard to believe in these days, when the Tchaikovsky concerto stands as one of the often-played Romantic violin works, this was a work that seemed bound for oblivion as soon as it was completed. Tchaikovsky had intended this as a work for Leopold Auer, then the reigning violin virtuoso in Russia, but when Auer examined the score, he pronounced it "unplayable." His opinion seems to have scared off every other Russian virtuoso until Adolf Brodsky finally volunteered to play the concerto—not in Moscow or St. Petersburg but a safe distance away in Vienna. The performance was a debacle, complete with an under-rehearsed orchestra. The conservative Viennese critic Eduard Hanslick gave the piece a truly savage review, ending with "...Tchaikovsky's *Violin Concerto* gives us for the first time the hideous notion that there can be music that stinks to the ear." Even Madame von Meck was critical, which wounded Tchaikovsky deeply.

He responded with a hurt letter that concluded: “...I shall not give up hope that in time the piece will give you greater pleasure.”

Brodsky remained a staunch champion of the concerto, however, and performed it a few months later—to a much warmer reception—in London, and eventually in Moscow. The concerto slowly began to gain acceptance among other players. Years later, even Auer began to praise the work, and his student Jascha Heifetz became one of the great 20th-century exponents of the concerto. Just why this work was so slow to catch on is obvious: it is *very* hard to play! Even with Kotek’s expert help, Tchaikovsky had produced a work that was beyond the technical capabilities of most 19th-century players. In some sense, though, works like this create their own players—as it began to become an established cornerstone of the repertoire, younger violinists like Heifetz faced its technical challenges as part of their musical training.

The concerto is in three movements:

- A broad movement in sonata form based upon two flowing themes.
- A wistful, songlike movement.
- A fierce, virtuosic rondo based upon a Russian dance theme.

What You’ll Hear

The concerto begins with a brief orchestral introduction (*Allegro moderato*) and a short cadenza before the violin introduces the first of two main themes. There is little contrast in character between these: ideas both come from same lyrical mold, and both serve as springboards for fiery elaboration by the soloist in an extended development section and lengthy cadenza. The second movement (*Canzonetta: Andante*) was not Tchaikovsky’s original conception—he composed and quickly discarded an entirely different movement (which reappeared as the *Méditation for Violin and Piano, Op.41 No.1*) before working out this lovely and melancholy piece. It begins with a quiet woodwind chorale, supporting a sad songlike melody from the solo. The mood brightens at the center of this brief movement, and when the opening material returns it is a direct bridge to the final movement (*Allegro vivacissimo*). This blazingly fast rondo begins with a folk-fiddle cadenza and a Russian country dance, and has several contrasting episodes, all of which have a distinctly rustic feel. Above it all sails the violin, performing a brilliant counterpoint—those “unplayable” runs and jumps that Leopold Auer objected to. The closing passage is one of Tchaikovsky’s most exciting codas.

Notes on Mr. Gendel’s work are forthcoming after January 2027.

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