

Program 2

Passacaglia for Strings

Frank Martin (1890-1974)

Composed for organ in 1944; arranged for strings in 1952.

Premiered on October 16, 1953 in Stuttgart, conducted by Karl Münchinger.

Frank Martin, one of Switzerland's greatest composers, was the tenth child of a Calvinist minister whose ancestors fled from France to Geneva with the Huguenots in the 18th century. Martin (mar-TAN, as in French) began composing when he was only eight and studied piano, composition and harmony privately with Joseph Lauber, but never undertook a formal music curriculum. From 1918 to 1923, he lived in Zurich and Rome, then moved to Paris, where he was strongly influenced by the trends in modern French music. He returned to an active professional life in Geneva in 1926 that included criticism, performance as a pianist and harpsichordist, administering the Association of Swiss Musicians, directing the Dalcroze Institute and composing. His earliest works were indebted to the German tradition, but after his stay in Paris he turned increasingly to experimenting with new styles and techniques, including those of ancient, Indian, Bulgarian and folk music. By 1932, those explorations had led Martin to the serial technique of Arnold Schoenberg, which he handled with an individuality that did not eschew traditional tonal elements. *Le Vin Herbé* ("The Doctored Wine"), his retelling of the old Tristan legend in the form of a "secular oratorio," won him international prominence despite the difficult conditions at the time of its premiere in Zurich in 1942. After World War II, he settled in Amsterdam, his wife's hometown, and in 1956 moved to the distant suburb of Naarden, remaining active as a composer, conductor and teacher (notably at the Hochschule für Musik in Cologne from 1950 to 1957) until his death in 1974. Of the style of Martin's later compositions, the Austrian pianist and composer Jacques de Menasce wrote, "[They] are characterized by broad melodic lines of a chromatic nature, subtle harmonic and rhythmic patterns, and a sustained contrapuntal texture. The common denominator can be described as an organic blend of several methods, which as a composite make for an idiom that is clearly personal."

Though Switzerland diligently maintained its neutrality during World War II, the country was completely surrounded during those years by Axis-controlled lands, subject to frequent violations of its airspace by the combatants, under constant pressure to accept refugees, and susceptible to the deadly mishaps of war — Basel, Zurich, Schaffhausen and several other Swiss towns were all accidentally bombed by the Allies in 1944 and 1945. It was therefore with understandable optimism that the Swiss received news of the D-Day invasion on June 6, 1944 and the growing certainty which followed that Nazi Germany would ultimately be defeated. In expectation of an imminent armistice, Radio Geneva commissioned Martin to write an oratorio titled *In Terra Pax* ("Peace on Earth") that would be premiered when a truce was finally signed; the work was broadcast on May 7, 1945, the day of Germany's surrender to the Allies. Martin received another request for a new work during the summer of 1944, this one from Kurt Wolfgang Senn, the organist at Berne Cathedral. Martin chose to write what was to be his only work for organ in the form of a Passacaglia, an old technique comprising a series of continuous variations built upon an invariably recurring melodic phrase, whose solemn mood, harmonic acerbity and inexorable motion seem to distill the war-weariness of the time of its creation; Senn premiered the piece in Berne on September 26, 1944. In 1952, Martin arranged the Passacaglia for strings for conductor Karl Münchinger and the Stuttgart Chamber Orchestra that he had founded seven years before, and for large orchestra ten years later.

The work's angular, repeating, eight-measure theme, unsettled in tonality since it uses eleven of the twelve available chromatic pitches, is stated at the outset by the low strings. The theme recurs 28 times draped with continuously developing lines, migrating into the upper voices as the Passacaglia builds to its emotional climax soon after the mid-point before settling again into the lower instruments for the work's thoughtful close.

Cello Concerto in A minor, Op. 129

Robert Schumann (1810-1856)

Composed in 1850.

Premiered on June 9, 1860 in Leipzig, with Ludwig Ebert as soloist.

In September 1850, the Schumanns left Dresden to take up residence in Düsseldorf, where Robert assumed the post of municipal music director. He was welcomed to the city with a serenade, a concert of his works, a supper and a ball. Though he had been cautioned by his friend Felix Mendelssohn a few years earlier that the local musicians were a shoddy bunch, he was eager to take on the variety of duties that awaited him in the Rhenish city, including conducting the orchestra's subscription concerts, leading performances of church music, giving private music lessons, organizing a chamber music society and composing as time allowed. Mendelssohn's advice notwithstanding, Schumann found the players acceptable, and plunged into his work with energy and enthusiasm. Surprisingly, this busy, new situation had a salutary effect on his composition, and within months he had composed the *Scenes from Goethe's "Faust"*, an Overture to Schiller's *The Bride of Messina*, many songs, the "Rhenish"

Symphony (inspired by a trip upstream on September 29th to Cologne's awesome cathedral) and this lovely Cello Concerto.

Despite Schumann's promising entry into the musical life of Düsseldorf, it was not long before things turned sour. His fragile mental health, his ineptitude as a conductor and his frequent irritability created a rift with the musicians, and the orchestra's governing body presented him with the suggestion that, perhaps, his time would be better devoted entirely to composition. Schumann, increasingly unstable though at first determined to stay, complained to his wife, Clara, that he was being cruelly treated. Proceedings were begun by the orchestra committee to relieve him of his position, but his resignation in 1853 ended the matter. By early the next year, Schumann's reason had completely given way. On February 27th, he tried to drown himself in the Rhine, and a week later he was committed to the asylum in Endenich, where he lingered with fleeting moments of sanity for nearly two-and-a-half years. His faithful Clara was there with him when he died on July 29, 1856, at the age of 46.

The Cello Concerto was a product of Schumann's first, happy months in Düsseldorf. Though it came near the end of his career, it is the result of a special affection he harbored for the cello throughout his life. When a finger injury in 1832 ended his piano playing, he dabbled for a short time with the cello as a musical outlet. Though he never mastered the instrument, his familiarity with it is evident in this Concerto. "Last month," Clara wrote in her diary on November 16, 1850, "Robert composed a concerto for the violoncello that pleased me very much. It appears to be written in the true violoncello style." This work, like the earlier Piano Concerto, eschews the flashing pyrotechnics of the traditional 19th-century virtuoso concerto in favor of a musical language richer and more subtle in its emotional expression. ("I cannot write a concerto for the virtuosos. I must try for something else," he vowed early in his career.) Schumann's Cello Concerto is among the most popular pieces in the literature for that instrument. Mstislav Rostropovich claims that he enjoys it more than any other cello concerto. And the legendary cellist Pablo Casals called it "one of the finest works one could wish to hear — sublime music from beginning to end."

Schumann composed the Concerto's three movements to be played without pause. This technical device not only helped to unify the work into a single span of music from its beginning to its end, but also served to curtail the applause which 19th-century audiences dispensed after every movement, a custom Schumann abhorred because it destroyed the work's carefully calculated mood. The Concerto's first two movements are expressive and largely contemplative, "exactly those qualities of the beloved enthusiastic dreamer whom we know as Schumann," wrote Sir Donald Tovey. The finale brings to the work a playful virtuosic verve which concludes the piece with a flurry of high spirits.

The first movement is a nearly seamless sonata form that looks forward to the monolithic structures of Brahms' opening movements. After three prefatory woodwind chords, the first theme is presented by the soloist above an undulating accompaniment. Following an orchestral interlude, the more animated second theme appears. The movement's central portion is occupied by one of Schumann's best and most compact developments, which utilizes the exposition's themes and a new, crisply rhythmic motive assigned to the cello's low register. The first and second themes return in the recapitulation to round out the movement.

The nocturnal slow movement, a wistful romanza in three-part form (A-B-A), follows without pause. Particularly touching here is the opening strain, a pastoral duet for the soloist and the principal cellist of the orchestra. A transition enlivened by an increasingly quick tempo leads to the finale, whose form combines elements of sonata and rondo. Much of this movement's thematic material springs from its bounding opening motive. A flourish of arpeggios sweeping through the cello's entire range brings this splendid Concerto to a close.

Clara Schumann's evaluation of this work, written on October 11, 1851, a year after it was composed, is still valid today. "I have played Robert's Violoncello Concerto again and thus procured for myself a truly musical and happy hour," she recounted. "The romantic quality, the flight, the freshness and the humor, and also the highly interesting interweaving of cello and orchestra are, indeed, wholly ravishing — and what euphony and what sentiment are in all those melodic passages!"

Symphony No. 1 in G minor, Op. 13, "Winter Dreams"

Peter Ilyich Tchaikovsky (1840-1893)

Composed in 1866; revised in 1874.

Premiere of complete Symphony on February 15, 1868 in Moscow, conducted by Nikolai Rubinstein; the second and third movements had been heard earlier.

In 1859, Anton Rubinstein established the Russian Musical Society in St. Petersburg; a year later his brother Nikolai opened the Society's branch in Moscow. Since one of the important aims of the Society was to encourage musical education in Russia, it instituted classes almost immediately in both cities. St. Petersburg was first to receive an imperial charter to open a conservatory and offer a formal curriculum of instruction, and Tchaikovsky, who had quit his job as a clerk in the Ministry of Justice to devote himself to music, was in the first class of students when the school was officially opened in 1862. By January 1866, he had completed his studies in theory and composition, principally with Rubinstein and Nikolai Zarembo, and was in need of a job. On the basis of his academic work, which included a cantata for the

graduation examinations courageously based on the same *Ode to Joy* text by Schiller that Beethoven had set in his Ninth Symphony, Rubinstein recommended Tchaikovsky to Nikolai as a teacher for the music classes in Moscow. The official opening of the Moscow Conservatory was still some months off, so Nikolai was running the program from his own home and was able to pay his instructors only a pittance. Though reluctant to leave the rich cultural milieu of St. Petersburg for provincial Moscow, Tchaikovsky accepted the much-needed position.

As soon as his St. Petersburg studies were completed in mid-January, Tchaikovsky departed for Moscow, where he was greeted at the train station like an old friend by Nikolai Rubinstein. Nikolai immediately took the young musician under his wing, lending him clothes (including a frock coat left behind by Wieniawski on a recent visit), introducing him to his wide circle of acquaintances, offering him a room in his home, and lavishing upon him every hospitality. (Rubinstein also included Tchaikovsky in his nightly rounds of tavern-hopping, during which each impressed the other with his capacity for alcohol.) Nikolai encouraged Tchaikovsky to supplement his teaching duties by continuing his creative work, and the first project he suggested was a revision for full orchestra of the *Overture in F major* written at the end of the preceding year. Tchaikovsky had conducted the original chamber orchestra version of the work as a student in December, shortly before he left the St. Petersburg Conservatory. The success of the revised version when it was conducted in Moscow by Nikolai on March 4th (the first public performance of one of Tchaikovsky's compositions) was such that the young composer was motivated to begin writing a symphony that same month. Almost as a fatalistic mockery of the enthusiasm with which it was begun, this G minor Symphony was to cause Tchaikovsky more emotional turmoil and physical suffering than any other piece he ever wrote.

On April 5th, only days after he had begun sketching the new work, Tchaikovsky discovered a harsh review by César Cui of his graduation cantata in a St. Petersburg newspaper. "When I read this terrible judgment," he later told his friend Alina Bryullova, "I hardly know what happened to me.... I spent the entire day wandering aimlessly about the town repeating to myself, 'I am sterile, I am a nonentity, nothing will ever come of me, I have no talent.'" In defiance of his tottering self-confidence, he pressed on doggedly with the new Symphony. On April 25th he wrote to his brother Anatoli, "I have been sleeping very badly lately. My 'apoplectic strokes' have returned stronger than ever.... My nerves are in an awful state because: 1) my symphony which is not going well; 2) Rubinstein and [the composer's friend] Tarnovsky, who have noticed that I am easily frightened, try all they can to scare me in all sorts of ways; 3) the ever-present thought that I am going to die soon and will not have time to finish my symphony." His misery was relieved a bit when he received news that Anton Rubinstein had conducted the recently revised *Overture in F major* in St. Petersburg on May 13th to much acclaim, but he was still looking eagerly forward to the quiet weeks of a country summer vacation to heal his afflictions.

Tchaikovsky originally planned to spend the summer of 1866 with his family at Kamenka, near St. Petersburg. However, he chose to accept instead an invitation from the sisters Vera and Elizabeth Davidova and their mother to join them at Myatlev, near Peterhof, because, he said, his straitened financial situation would not allow the longer trip and he was frightened by the reports that weather had made the road to Kamenka impassable. Actually, he may have been trying to rouse his passion for Vera in another of his unsuccessful attempts to deny his homosexuality to himself and the world. The visit seems to have started out well enough at the end of May, when Tchaikovsky played piano duet versions of Mendelssohn's "Italian" Symphony and Schumann's orchestral works with Vera, took long, solitary walks and made enough progress on the new Symphony to report to his sister Alexandra that he had begun its orchestration on June 6th. But his mental state soon began to collapse to an alarming degree from the frustration with his new work, perhaps aggravated by his conflicting sexual feelings. In his biography of his brother, Modeste Tchaikovsky recalled that Peter's troubles were "most probably due to the fact that he wrote this symphony not only during the day but also at night. He referred in his letters to 'throbbings in the head' and insomnia as a result of working at night. In spite of his application and enthusiasm, the work progressed slowly, and the further he got with the symphony, the more Peter Ilyich's nerves became affected. His sleep was ruined by the unaccustomed work, and sleepless nights paralyzed his energy and ability to compose. At the end of July, all this came to a head in fits brought on by terrible nervous disorders such as he never again experienced in his life. The doctor who was called in to treat him found that 'he was on the verge of madness' and, during the first few days, considered his case almost hopeless. The chief and worst symptoms of this illness were hallucinations, a terrifying sense of dread, and a feeling of complete numbness in his extremities." Rest was prescribed, and Tchaikovsky gladly gave up work on the new symphony for the time being. He never again composed at night.

Tchaikovsky was well enough to return to Moscow in August, but he decided to detour through St. Petersburg to show the unfinished manuscript to his teachers, Anton Rubinstein and Zaremba, in the hope of securing its performance during the coming season of the Russian Musical Society. Both condemned the score, however, and demanded that it be thoroughly revised before he brought it to them again. He arrived in Moscow in time for the official opening of the Conservatory in September, playing Glinka's *Ruslan and Ludmilla Overture* on the piano as part of the inaugural ceremonies. The unfinished Symphony was still much on his mind, but before he could return to it, he had to finish an *Overture on Danish Themes* for the festivities surrounding the upcoming marriage of the Tsarevich to a Danish bride. It was not until late November 1866, therefore, that the G minor Symphony was completed. Despite incorporating the changes ordered by his St. Petersburg teachers, only the second and third movements were accepted for performance there. These received considerable applause when Nikolai Rubinstein conducted them on February 11, 1867, though the *Scherzo* had been less successful when it was given a trial at his earlier concert in Moscow on December 10th.

Tchaikovsky continued to revise the work, which was finally given in its complete form by Nikolai in Moscow on February 15, 1868 “with great success,” reported the composer to his brother Anatoli. More changes were made to the score after its premiere, especially in tightening the structure of the first movement, before it was published early in 1875 by Jurgenson. This is the form in which the Symphony is known today.

Tchaikovsky had a life-long affection for this Symphony which was the product of such travail. He wrote to a friend on October 17, 1883, “Despite its glaring deficiencies I have a soft spot for it, for it is a sin of my sweet youth.” And a month later, to Mme. von Meck: “I don’t know if you are acquainted with this work of mine. Although it is immature in many respects it is essentially better and richer in content than many other more mature works.” About the titles appended to the Symphony he left no such thoughts. The entire Symphony was inscribed “Winter Dreams.” The first two movements were called “Reveries of a Winter Journey” and “Land of Desolation, Land of Mists”; the closing movements are without sobriquet. There is no specific program apparent in the music, though Tchaikovsky may have intended that this be his contribution to the many depictions of the harsh Russian winters that have always been popular subjects in that country’s literature and art. There is probably also some influence of Mendelssohn’s “Italian” Symphony, a piece which he valued highly at the time of this work’s composition, in representing certain general national characteristics.

The first movement opens as the flute and bassoon present the doleful main theme above the murmurings of the violins. The complementary melody, more lyrical in phrasing and brighter in mood, is sung initially by the clarinet. The development section, typically Tchaikovskian in many of its orchestral techniques, combines true motivic elaboration with a certain amount of boisterous, newly invented figuration. The recapitulation returns the themes of the beginning and ends with the hushed whispers of the first measures.

A chorale-like passage for strings opens and closes the second movement. Within this frame are set two folkish melodies: the first, a plaintive tune, intoned by the oboe, has hints of the *Volga Boatmen*; the other is a more flowing song given first by the flutes and violas. The nimble *Scherzo*, indebted to Mendelssohn for its effervescent writing, is based on a movement from Tchaikovsky’s Piano Sonata in C-sharp minor, composed in 1865. The lovely central *Trio* is the first of the succession of great waltzes Tchaikovsky penned for orchestra. The finale is a gloriously noisy display of orchestral color and rhythmic energy. It begins with a slow introduction (“lugubrious,” notes the score) during which the violins present the Russian folk song *The Gardens Bloomed*. A vivacious main theme in fast tempo is hurled forth by the full orchestra before the folk song returns to serve as the second theme. Twice the tempo is increased in the closing pages so that the ending of the Symphony is filled with brilliant whirling vitality and bursting high spirits.

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