

By Richard Freed © 2017

Richard Freed, now in his twenty-sixth season as program annotator for the Flint Symphony Orchestra, is a former music critic for *The New York Times* and *Saturday Review*. His credentials include service as assistant to the director of the University of Rochester's Eastman School of Music, executive director of the Music Critics Association, record critic for *The Washington Star* and *The Washington Post*, and program annotator for the St. Louis Symphony, Baltimore Symphony, Houston Symphony, National Symphony (Washington, D.C.) and Philadelphia Orchestras. He has received two ASCAP-Deems Taylor Awards for his concert and record annotations, and a Grammy Award for the latter. In 2003, the President of Finland awarded him the medal of Knight First Class in the Order of the Lion of Finland.

The Star-Spangled Banner

JOHN STAFFORD SMITH

*Born April 23, 1891, Sontzovka, Ukraine**Died March 5, 1953, Moscow*

Orchestral version arranged and orchestrated by Arturo Toscanini (1867-1954)

The story of how an American lawyer named Francis Scott Key came to write the patriotic poem *The Star-Spangled Banner* aboard a British ship in Baltimore Harbor toward the end of the War of 1812 is well known. It was quickly set to the tune of an English drinking song, "To Anacreon in Heaven," and sung widely and enthusiastically for more than a hundred years before it was officially made our National Anthem as recently as 1931.

The music of that drinking song lent itself well to patriotic purposes, and, as *The Star-Spangled Banner*, it has been given handsome treatment by more than a few musicians over the years. Conductors in particular have undertaken symphonic treatments of the song, and for the legendary Arturo Toscanini it was a genuine labor of love. Unlike numerous other European conductors who made their careers in our country, Toscanini never took U.S. citizenship, but his feelings of affection and respect were both genuine and profound, and he not only orchestrated our National Anthem but revised his scoring of it more than once. This is illustrated by a frequently retold story of how Toscanini, like Francis Scott Key himself, made his feelings known aboard a ship.

In the summer of 1940, Toscanini took his still new NBC Symphony Orchestra on a tour of South America under the sponsorship of the State Department. One morning, as their ship took them from one port to another, he called an unscheduled rehearsal, of *The Star-Spangled Banner* alone. Following that single run-through, he addressed the orchestra, "That will be all, gentlemen; today is the Fourth of July." ■

Polovtsian Dances, from "Prince Igor"

ALEXANDER BORODIN

*Born November 11, 1833, St. Petersburg**Died there February 27, 1887*

While Borodin is remembered as one of the outstanding Russian composers of his time, he was not a full-time musician. He was by profession a chemist and physician, and quite an important one, as certified by the statues erected in Russia in honor of Borodin the scientist. *Prince Igor*, his most ambitious musical work, occupied him for some 18 years, but his other commitments were such that he died without completing the opera. He wrote his own libretto, with the help

of the critic Vladimir Stasov, based on the old historical document *The Epic of Igor and His Army*. He set about to write a thoroughly Russian opera, as Mussorgsky had done, owing little or nothing to Italian or German tradition. Portions of *Prince Igor* were performed during Borodin's lifetime, but he never got round to orchestrating the opera or drawing it together in finished dramatic shape, both of which tasks were left to his friend and colleague Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov and Rimsky's brilliant young pupil Alexander Glazunov. It appears, however, that Borodin himself actually completed the orchestration of the Polovtsian Dances, leaving little for Rimsky to do in this section beyond a little editorial polishing, and the dances were performed in concerts well before the opera's premiere, which took place in St. Petersburg on November 4, 1890.

The epic on which the opera is based is the story of Prince Igor Sviatoslavich of Sversk and his campaign, in 1185, to save his city of Putivl from the raids by the Tatar tribe of Polovtsi. Igor and his son Vladimir are captured by the Polovtsi, whose chief, Khan Konchak, treats them as honored guests and offers Igor his freedom in exchange for his pledge not to resume the fight. Igor, refusing that offer, manages to escape, rejoin his wife and deal with the intrigues that have arisen in his absence, but his son remains with the Polovtsi and marries the Khan's daughter.

The Polovtsian Dances represent the culmination of the lavish entertainment the Khan stages for Igor, in Act II. (The sequence of the second and third of the opera's four acts, however, is reversed in the current Kirov production and some others.). Slave girls, warriors and young boys take part in the various dances, which range in mood from seductive languor to barbaric abandon. In order to achieve a realistically authentic musical image, Borodin studied the lore and music of the Tatars and Turkomans, and his flavorfully exotic mix also includes actual folk themes from the Caucasus and as far from Russia as Ethiopia and the Moorish sectors of North Africa.

In the opera, the Polovtsian Dances are sung as well as danced, but the concert version is for the orchestra alone. The dances are in seven brief sections, following an introduction: a dance of the captive maidens, who sing of their homeland; a warriors' dance; an archers' dance, with a contrasting section for the Khans' captives; a two-part dance for boys and for men; a reprise of the maidens' dance, eventually combining with the boys' dance; another section for first the boys and then the men; and finally a dance for the entire company, with all participants singing in praise of Khan Konchak. ■

Piano Concerto No. 1 in B-flat minor

PYOTR ILYICH TCHAIKOVSKY

*Born May 7, 1840, Kamsko-Votkinsk, Russia**Died November 6, 1893, St. Petersburg*

This extraordinarily popular concerto, very likely the most beloved work in its category ever set before the public, provided a jarring disappointment for the composer when he offered it to its intended dedicatee, but shortly after that it brought him his first premiere outside his own country, which proved to be a spectacularly successful event, reliably predicting the enthusiasm the Concerto has sustained since then.

Tchaikovsky was filled with gratitude toward Nikolai Rubinstein for his many kindnesses, and with admiration for him as a musician, when he composed this concerto for him in the late fall of 1874; he could not have been prepared for the response he got when he took the piano score to him on Christmas Eve. Rubinstein, who had been downright paternal toward Tchaikovsky and conspicuously supportive of his music, did not

even bother to be tactful, but brutally denounced the work's flaws and dismissed it as "unplayable." Tchaikovsky left that stormy encounter deeply wounded and vowing not to change a single note.

Fortunately, Hans von Bülow was touring in Russia at just about the time Tchaikovsky completed the Concerto's orchestration, two months after the scene with Rubinstein. Bülow, an enormously respected pianist and conductor, had discovered some of Tchaikovsky's pieces for piano solo when he was in Russia the previous year, and had happily added them to his repertory. Now, early in 1875, he was looking for a new concerto for his American debut, scheduled for the fall of that year, and he knew he had found what he wanted when Tchaikovsky showed him the score he had just completed. Naturally, the delighted composer now dedicated the work to his new champion. Bülow's own enthusiasm was roundly supported by that of his audiences, both at the work's premiere in Boston (October 25, 1875), where he was obliged to repeat the final movement, and throughout Europe in the months that followed.

In the face of Bülow's success with the Concerto, Rubinstein took another look at it, and did take up the work himself, after all, with similar success. Tchaikovsky, for his part, did change more than a few notes, incorporating several of Rubinstein's suggestions. Their friendship restored, Rubinstein continued to conduct the premieres of several of Tchaikovsky's major works, as he had done before, and Tchaikovsky composed his Second Concerto for him, somewhat more grandly proportioned than its predecessor. Rubinstein, however, died in March 1881, without having a chance to perform that work, and Tchaikovsky marked his passing by composing his Trio in A minor—a gesture foretold in a sense, by the unusual inclusion of elaborate solo parts for violin and cello in the slow movement of the Second Concerto, giving the effect of a miniature trio within a concerto.

When Tchaikovsky composed his First Concerto he would not have dreamed it would have its premiere in America, where he was then entirely unknown, but it did, and the enormous success of that Boston premiere created a receptive public for his subsequent works. His Third Symphony, composed in 1875 was performed by the New York Philharmonic four years later, the Second Concerto was actually given its premiere in that city in 1881, and ten years later Tchaikovsky himself was invited there to conduct his music in the concerts that opened Carnegie Hall. He conducted in Baltimore and Philadelphia as well during that visit, and the First Concerto was so popular by then that it had to be included in his programs.

The majestic opening section, possibly intended as a tribute to Rubinstein, is built on a big, sweeping theme that is Tchaikovsky's own, but the one that dominates the remainder of the first movement was identified by him as a tune "sung by every blind beggar in Little Russia" (Ukraine, a region whose folk music the composer got to know well on his visits to the estate of his sister and her husband).

The simple tune with which the flute opens the slow movement also has a folk-song quality, but again it is Tchaikovsky's own. Encapsulated within this *Andantino*, though, is a little scherzo episode whose sprightly tune comes from a French song, "Il faut s'amuser, danser et rire," which had special claims on his affections. It was introduced into the Tchaikovsky household by a much loved French governess and became a favorite of the composer's younger brothers, the twins Anatoly and Modest; it was sung, too, by the Belgian singer and actress Désirée Artôt, whom Tchaikovsky came close to marrying.

The vigorous finale, so often characterized as a Cossack dance,

contains nothing borrowed from any source, but might remind us that, while Tchaikovsky may have been more cosmopolitan in his outlook than his avowedly nationalistic compatriots, he was certainly no less thoroughly Russian. The triumphal theme at the end is not too distantly related to the grand one that opens the work. ■

Symphony No. 1 in C minor, Op. 68

JOHANNES BRAHMS

Born May 7, 1833, Hamburg

Died April 3, 1897, Vienna

As early as 1854 Brahms began writing a symphony which he took as far as a complete setting for two pianos. He never published it, and never even made a start at orchestrating it, but he did conserve three of its four movements for other works that required an orchestra: the first and second movements were adapted for the First Piano Concerto, begun the same year and completed in 1858, and the funereal scherzo-substitute turned up in *A German Requiem*, which occupied him from 1857 to 1868.

The two large-scale serenades—Op. 11 in D major for full orchestra, Op. 16 in A major for a smaller one without violins—appeared more or less simultaneously with the First Concerto, toward the end of the 1850s, but it was not until his fortieth year that Brahms completed another work for orchestra without either vocal or instrumental soloists. This was still not a symphony, but the masterly *Variations on a Theme* by Haydn: a significant gesture, we might say, on the part of a cautious would-be symphonist nearly 80 years after Haydn's last essay in that form, for Haydn's most illustrious pupil had ensured that the symphony would thereafter be the most revered and most expressive form of orchestral music, and frequently the most personal.

No one was more aware of this, or of the expectations to be faced, than Brahms himself. He was particularly aware of—and seriously intimidated by—the expectations created by Beethoven. Even after establishing himself with his *German Requiem* and *Haydn Variations*, Brahms remarked, in dead earnest, "You have no idea how the likes of us feels to hear the tread of a giant like him behind us!" With this in mind, he dug in for a long effort.

Brahms made the first sketches for what was to become his Symphony No. 1 in 1856, the year of his mentor Schumann's death. By the time he brought the work to completion, some twenty years later, he was 43 years old, a highly respected composer and, as the opus number indicates, hardly an inactive one. The premiere of the First Symphony, given at Karlsruhe on November 4, 1876, under Otto Dessoff, was a triumph, and the influential Hans von Bülow did not hesitate to proclaim it "the Tenth"—a tribute Brahms understood, of course, but received with mixed feelings. With the new confidence gained through the success of the First, though, he was able to proceed with his Second Symphony at once; in contradistinction to the years of effort the First had cost him, he produced the Second flowed from his thoughts freely and quickly, and he had the pleasure of hearing it performed by Hans Richter and the Vienna Philharmonic by the end of 1877.

Both Richter and Bülow, despite their ties with Wagner, were to remain stalwart champions of Brahms's music to the end of his life, and of their own. When Brahms completed the last of his four symphonies, in 1885, Bülow, who was then conductor of a fine orchestra in Meiningen, invited him there to conduct the work's premiere himself, and then had

him conduct further performances with the same orchestra on a tour of German and Dutch cities. Richter conducted the Fourth in Vienna a short time before Brahms's death in 1897; that was the occasion for the composer's last public appearance, at which tears streamed down his face during the ovation he received.

Brahms succeeded in giving each of his four symphonies an individual character, quite distinct from the others. The First is surely the most overtly dramatic of the four, and perhaps not entirely free of self-consciousness in its large and emphatic gestures. It is hardly inappropriate, though, that so large a work, representing so long and hard-won a struggle with self-doubt, should be characterized, as the first movement of this work is, by restlessness, urgency and a certain element of defiance. There is in fact much in this opening movement to link it with that of the early Piano Concerto No. 1, with which it is, after all, more or less contemporaneous. The turbulent mood is established at the outset by the searing phrase rising out of the insistent drumbeats; the themes themselves take a jagged shape, and there is little respite from the nervous drive until the movement's end, which comes on a note of unexpectedly quiet resolve.

After this stormy scene, the prevailing mood of the second movement is one of heart-easing calm and solace. There is no muscle-

flexing here, only a serene vision of peace in the simple motif introduced by the solo violin and echoed in turn by the horn and various winds.

Altogether brighter than anything that has gone before is the songlike third movement, which is not quite a scherzo, but rather one of Brahms's characteristic intermezzos. It is cheerful in a gentle, restrained way, but also touched by melancholy, with sunset hues evoked by the winds under the lead of the clarinet. The contrasting middle section, corresponding to a trio, is conspicuously more animated, but short-lived.

The first three movements having played out their parts in the symphonic drama, the stage is set now for its resolution in the form of a massive finale. The mood of deep expectancy comes to a head in the suspenseful introduction: when a peak of excitement and tension has been reached there is an outburst of drums and a brief gesture from the horns, noble and calming, pushes back the clouds to make way for a brass chorale (derived from the work's opening) which serves as a sort of benediction. Following this the strings enter at last with the majestic theme of the finale proper, which becomes progressively more exultant, culminating in an extended coda in which the brass chorale from the introductory section returns in blazingly assertive form. ■